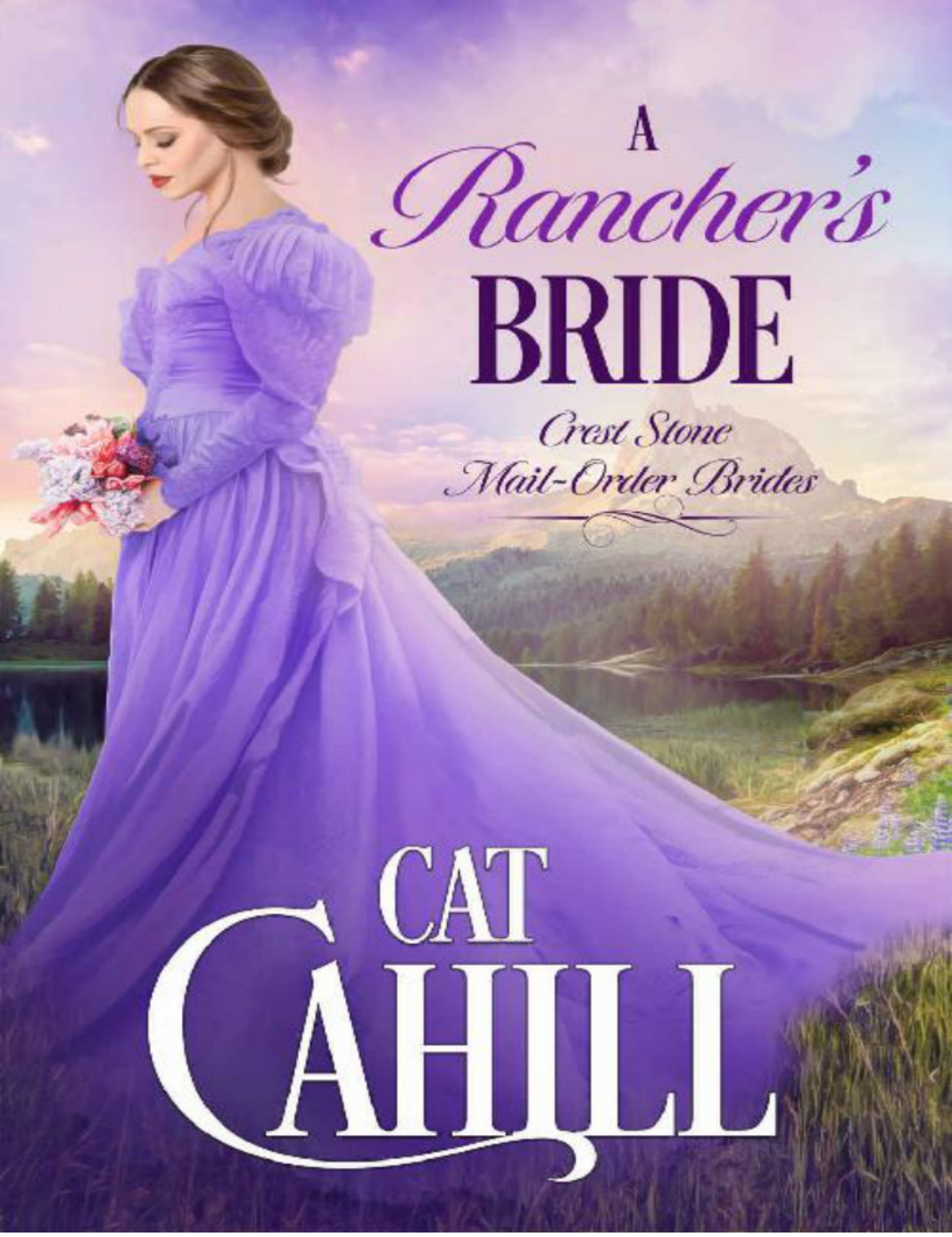

A
Rancher's
BRIDE
Crest Stone
Mail-Order Brides
CAT
CAHILL

A Rancher's Bride

Crest Stone Mail-Order Brides, Book 2

by Cat Cahill

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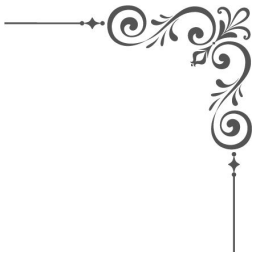
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Chapter One

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY — 1876

The young man nearly dove into the carriage waiting on the street. In a split second, the carriage was gone, carrying with it the last of Susannah Hughes's hopes and dreams.

She sighed and leaned her head against the parlor window. Mr. Davidson was merely the latest in a string of suitor casualties. Word had gotten around the city about Susannah's uncle, but every so often, she'd manage to charm some poor, unknowing man into calling on her —only to have him go running from the premises the moment he met her uncle. This last one had left so quickly that Vernon, their butler, hadn't even been able to properly show him out.

"Did Mr. Davidson leave already?" Mama asked from the parlor door. "Your conversation had been going so well."

"It was, but almost immediately after you excused yourself, Uncle Bertram swooped in with his menacing gaze and his interrogation about finances." Susannah sighed again. "I'm on the verge of spinsterhood."

Mama crossed the room, took Susannah's hand, and led her to the settee. "Now," she said, gathering both of Susannah's hands in her own. "First, that isn't true."

"I'm twenty-two! All of my friends are married." Susannah's voice broke. As much as she loved her friends and was happy for them, it hurt to see them setting up their own homes, planning dinner parties, and announcing babies—while she remained here, under Uncle Bertram's thumb. Each and every one of her dearest friends—even Emma, whose family had lost everything—was happily married.

"Twenty-two does not mean you are on the shelf," Mama said sternly.

Susannah gave her a cutting look. "Mama, please be honest with me. It will only get more difficult the older I become."

Mama closed her eyes a moment, and then finally nodded. "You're correct. Harder, but not impossible."

"With Uncle Bertram?"

Mama sighed herself this time. She dropped Susannah's hands and leaned back against the settee. "He does make things rather difficult."

"Rather? How about *extraordinarily*? One of the Vanderbilts could come calling, and Uncle Bertram would run him off too." Susannah looked down at her hands. It wasn't as if she couldn't get a man's attention. While she wasn't the most beautiful woman in the room,

her quick wit and genuine friendliness usually overcame any shortcomings in her looks. But Uncle drove each and every caller off—because if Susannah married, the inheritance from her father went with her. And Uncle Bertram, her father's brother, would have nothing save his own meager earnings.

If Uncle had his way, Susannah would never marry.

"There simply must be another way," she said. "I refuse to give up hope of having my own family some day."

"Perhaps you could go abroad," Mama suggested.

"Uncle would never allow that. Unless he came along," Susannah replied. She could only just imagine viewing the wonders of Europe with Uncle Bertram hovering behind her like a dark shadow.

"We could send Bertram abroad. Alone," Mama said. She looked at Susannah, and they both laughed. It would be a dream to be free of him for months on end.

They sat in silence a moment, and another idea surfaced in Susannah's mind. One she'd thought on a few times before, but that she hadn't seriously considered . . . until now.

"Mama," she said hesitantly. "Do you remember Emma Daniels?"

"Of course I do. That poor family." Then Mama smiled, and said, "How could I forget that handsome cowboy who came looking for her last year?"

Susannah smiled too. "Mr. Hartley is a builder, Mama. Although I believe Emma said he'd worked on ranches in the past." They'd met him on their own front steps, where he'd been going door-to-door, searching for the woman who'd left him behind in the Colorado Territory. Susannah would never forget his tenacity, or the way his eyes lit up when he spoke of Emma. His presence had reminded her that she'd been a poor friend to Emma since the Daniels family's decline. Emma had returned to Colorado before Susannah could call on her, but Susannah had diligently written to her friend ever since then. "Emma is very happy with her life in the Colorado Territory."

Mama nodded, and Susannah could see she'd need to do more than simply hint at her idea. She drew in a deep breath, not entirely certain herself that it was something she wanted to pursue. But unless Uncle Bertram left on a last-minute trip to Europe, it might be her *only* option if she didn't want to become a spinster.

"Mama, Emma told me about friends of hers in Colorado—respectable married ladies—who have started a service for men who wish to be married." She paused, ready for Mama to dismiss the idea out of hand.

But instead, Mama sat up straighter, seemingly interested in hearing more.

Encouraged, Susannah continued. "They have far more men in

their town than women, and so this service places advertisements from the men into a newspaper—a matrimonial newspaper—which is then sent to cities all over the East. An interested lady can begin a correspondence with the man of her choice, and if they're compatible, the man will pay for the lady's transportation to the Colorado Territory, where they'll meet and be married." She twisted her hands together as Mama nodded slowly. Was it possible the idea wasn't as far-fetched as Susannah had thought? "Emma sent me a copy of the newspaper."

"What an enterprising idea," Mama said. "But what sorts of men are these?"

"They're respectable. Emma said that her friends interview each man to ensure his suitability. They only accept men of quality, although they may be of a wide variety of occupations."

Mama looked deep in thought for a moment, tapping her fingers on the settee. "I believe I'd like to see this newspaper. Do you still have it?"

With a wide grin, Susannah jumped up, ran to her room upstairs, and returned with the newspaper. Mama laid it out on her knees and began reading. Susannah waited impatiently, her fingers clutched together until they tingled.

When Mama finished, she looked up and asked, "Did any of these men strike your fancy?"

Susannah swallowed hard. Was Mama seriously considering this?

Even more important, was Susannah?

She glanced down at the descriptions and photographs of the various men, and brushing a tendril of curled dark hair back over her shoulder, her eyes landed on the man she'd first been drawn to when she opened the newspaper.

Even now, after having looked at the newspaper again and again since it had arrived, her heart beat a little faster as she studied his photograph. The advertisement listed him as a Mr. Jacob Fletcher, and his photo indicated he had lighter hair and eyes. But it was his expression that had first drawn her eye. Mr. Fletcher looked to be both confident and kind.

She pointed to him without speaking and held her breath as Mama read the advertisement.

"He is handsome," Mama murmured.

"And it says here he has his own successful ranch and a comfortable home," Susannah added. "Which means I shouldn't want for anything."

Mama nodded, her lips pursed.

Susannah bit her lip and looked at Mr. Fletcher's picture again. If Mama agreed, could she really do this? Could she write to a man

neither she nor no one she knew had ever met, possibly board a train for a wild place hundreds of miles away, and then marry him? Her stomach seemed to jump at the thought. It was so very terrifying, all of it, and yet . . . It felt right.

"He is a bit older," Mama said.

"Not all that much. Besides, that means he's had more time to build his ranch." The man was hardly *old*, after all. "Mr. Dorton is about the same age, and we got along quite well before Uncle ran him off."

"Bertram won't have much of a say in anything if you leave town to marry." Mama seemed to be speaking her thoughts aloud. "We'd have to keep the correspondence a secret. And of course, you wouldn't be able to take your inheritance."

Susannah glanced at Mr. Fletcher's image again, and she gave it a little smile as Mama spoke. She'd happily give up the money if it meant she might finally have a home and a husband all her own.

"If the man turns out to be agreeable, we'll pack your trunks while Bertram is at his office. You'd need to board the train first thing the next morning after he leaves the house. I'll tell him you aren't feeling well at dinner, and then break the news gently to him the following day."

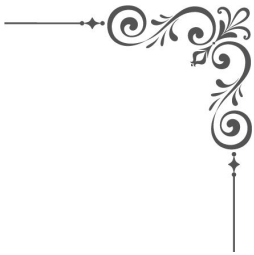
Susannah swallowed. "I can write to him now. If you think it's a good idea?"

"I think it's an unconventional but promising idea." Mama turned and took Susannah's face in her hands. "All I want is for you to be happy, and I've seen that chance slip away again and again. If this is what needs to happen for you to finally live the life you deserve, then so be it."

Susannah's throat grew tight with tears, and she forced herself to breath through it. She leaned forward and embraced Mama. "Thank you," she whispered before pulling back. "But if this works out, what will you do here alone? I shudder to think of you enduring endless dinners with Uncle Bertram."

Mama smiled, her eyes watery. "I believe I shall visit my sister. She's asked me many times, after all. And if I like it enough in Chicago, I might opt to remain there. I'll stay here a month or so, though, to ensure Bertram doesn't feel the need to track you down—although I doubt he will. That money is all he cares about."

Susannah squeezed Mama's hands. With any luck, they'd each be off on their own adventures by the end of summer, out from under Uncle Bertram's dour rule.



Chapter Two

NEAR CREST STONE, COLORADO Territory — 1876

Jacob Fletcher had saved the letter to read once he was alone. Finally, that moment came a couple of hours after dinner, once the ranch hands had retired to the bunkhouse, the evening chores were completed, and he'd checked in on his housekeeper and cook, Mrs. Abbott, in her sickbed.

The house was quiet now, and Jacob sat at the desk in the small room off the parlor that served as his office. The top drawer of his desk held at least fifteen responses to the advertisement he'd placed earlier in the month. Considering he thought it a certainty he'd receive none at all, the arrival of even one letter had surprised him. And then they continued to arrive, but he'd not felt certain about a single one of them. Each lady sounded decent enough, but none had made him pause. None of them had made him yearn to know more or to meet them.

Mrs. Abbott told him he was being too selective. "If the woman has a generous personality and a good spirit and can work hard, that's all you need," she'd said. "The love will come in time."

Perhaps she was right. And yet Jacob hadn't written to any of the women who'd responded thus far.

The desire for a wife and a family had come upon him suddenly. Perhaps it was that he'd finally settled into the routine of ranch life again after a year away, or perhaps it was seeing his sister, Kate, and her husband so happy that had motivated him. And when Kate had told him about two the ladies who had once worked at her hotel starting up a business placing matrimonial advertisements for men wishing to marry, he hadn't been able to get the idea out of his mind.

He turned up the lamp, filling the little room with more light. The shadows danced off the walls as he took up the letter he'd just picked up in town today. This one came from Louisville, Kentucky and was addressed in a neat, feminine script. As he picked up the letter opener, he prayed that this might be the one. That there might be something about this lady that made him want to take up his pen immediately and respond to her.

Drawing in a deep breath, he sliced open the letter and began to read.

Dear Mr. Fletcher,

This is a highly unusual way to make the acquaintance of a gentleman, and yet, with my mother's blessing, I felt compelled to write to you. My

name is Miss Susannah Hughes. I am twenty-two years of age. I have enclosed a recent photograph, which I believe is a good likeness. My greatest hope is to have a husband, a home, and a family of my own. My efforts here have been unsuccessful, although not by fault of either myself or any interested gentlemen.

That was curious, Jacob thought. His interest piqued, he continued reading.

In your advertisement, you asked for a capable woman. I believe I am such, as I have learned how to manage a household. Although I have no experience in country life, I enjoy being outdoors and learning new things. You ought to see the little garden I keep behind our home. The neighbors have complained that my morning glory vines have crept a little too heartily onto their property, and yet they were quite happy when I presented them with some lovely robust tomatoes last summer. They have not yet complained this year—I believe they hope they'll receive more tomatoes if they keep quiet.

Jacob laughed out loud. The lady certainly had a sense of humor.

I am straying from the subject, aren't I? What else might you like to know about me? I am adept with a needle, I enjoy entertaining friends and relatives at gatherings, and I can create lovely watercolors—although I'm not certain how the latter might be useful on a ranch unless you'd like to adorn your walls with art depicting waterlilies or country churches.

Jacob chuckled again, imagining his bare walls covered in frilly paintings. Miss Hughes went on to say she enjoyed reading, conversation, and good soup. When he finished reading her letter, Jacob read it again. Then he set it down and realized he was grinning at nothing. There was no need to open the drawer and compare this particular letter to the others he'd received. It stood apart, not only in humor, but in confidence and personality. He had the distinct feeling that Miss Hughes was a singular woman. Her personality sparkled throughout the letter, and she certainly seemed a capable enough person.

And he certainly needed a capable woman about the house.

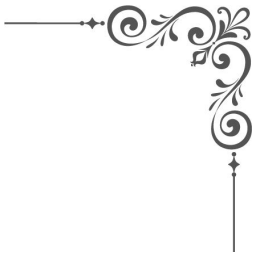
Mrs. Abbott, his housekeeper and cook, was under strict orders from the doctor to remain abed for at least another two months while the fractures she'd sustained when she tumbled from the front porch healed completely. That meant that Jacob was not only in charge of ensuring the ranch ran properly, but also cooking up large quantities of food the best he could to feed himself, Mrs. Abbott, and all of his ranch hands. And more than one of them had let him know he wasn't quite up to the job. Mrs. Abbott guided him as best she could from her sickbed, but if Jacob was to be in charge of feeding them much longer, they'd likely all perish from starvation before the summer was out.

But if Miss Hughes was here, with her soup receipts and her

vegetable garden and her ability to cook for her many friends, they might be saved after all. Not to mention that Jacob had placed the advertisement in the hopes of finding companionship, and someone with whom to start a family. It looked as his advertisement had finally paid off. He'd asked for an intelligent woman, one capable of managing a home with a cheerful personality. Somehow, he'd been lucky enough to have Miss Hughes respond.

As he took up a piece of paper and dipped his pen into the inkwell, he hoped Miss Hughes would find his offer satisfactory. If she did, he could be a married man within two months' time.

Jacob's lips curved up in another grin as he wrote, imagining the laughter of a woman filling the house, a smiling face to return home to each day, and a companion with whom to share all of his thoughts and dreams.



Chapter Three

SUSANNAH EMERGED FROM the train into the bright sunlight that reflected down onto the platform. She blinked and adjusted her hat as best she could as she looked around her. People spilled from the train, some heading off into town, others embracing people waiting nearby, and still others climbing aboard carriages that looked as if they were preparing to take the short journey up a hill to a grand looking building. The structures on either side of the depot didn't look like much, but Susannah was undeterred in her optimism.

Most impressive of all were the mountains that rose so high into the sky she could hardly wonder at their height. What an incredible sort of place she'd found herself in! It was just as Emma had described it. Nothing here looked like home, from the people to the buildings to the plants that grew along the train tracks. She tried to commit each little detail to memory to tell Mama in a letter.

And Emma was here somewhere. She'd held off on writing to her friend, afraid that if she conveyed her hopeful news, that it would all fall apart somehow. But now that she was here, Susannah wanted to write Emma immediately to let her know.

But first, she had to find Mr. Fletcher.

Susannah took a few steps forward, carrying her carpetbag. A porter had ever so kindly set her trunks down on the platform since she didn't know where Mr. Fletcher's carriage might be waiting. A group moved away from in front of her, and there—standing near the depot building, a hat in his hands and eyes tracing their way across the passengers—stood a man who resembled the one in the newspaper photo.

She drew in a deep breath. If this was him, he was even more handsome in person. The sun glinted off his fair hair, illuminating strands of red against a face tanned from the sun. She couldn't tell his particular eye color from this distance, but he cut a fine figure in a suit and what looked like work boots. Those were unexpected, although, Susannah reminded herself, he did run a ranch. He likely had to be outside, looking over the cattle and the men who worked for him. It would be impractical to wear nice shoes to do such a thing.

Pushing her shoulders back, Susannah strode across the platform toward him. As she grew closer, she hesitated, her confidence flagging. What if he was someone else? Or worse, what if it was Mr. Fletcher and he took one look at her and decided to put her right back on that train?

Nonsense, she told herself. She might not be the prettiest girl around, but she was perfectly friendly and she had a generous smile to match. Everyone at home liked her just fine, even the poor men Uncle Bertram had run off.

She grinned as she remembered there was no Uncle Bertram in Crest Stone, Colorado. Here, she could marry right this minute if she so chose. The independence was a heady feeling, and it propelled Susannah forward to the man standing alone.

He turned his attention to her immediately, looking her over once, and then smiling. “Good afternoon,” he said in a voice that sent shivers up Susannah’s spine.

She widened her eyes in surprise, before quickly regaining her composure. “Good afternoon. I’m looking for a Mr. Jacob Fletcher.”

His smile grew, and Susannah took that as a promising sign. “I am he, and I’m hoping you might be Miss Susannah Hughes.”

“I am.” Susannah looked down, feeling abnormally bashful. This was ridiculous. She’d never had trouble conversing with a man before, but there was something about Mr. Fletcher that made her heart feel as if it were somewhere outside of her body and her head spin as if she were on the verge of fainting. She forced herself to breathe normally until the feeling dissipated.

“Let me gather your things,” he said, replacing his hat and stepping toward the train.

“The porter left them beside the train.” Susannah gestured toward the waiting cars. The crowd had thinned, and her three trunks sat alone by the car in which she’d ridden from Denver.

“Which one is yours?” Mr. Fletcher asked as they approached the trunks.

“All three are mine.”

He paused and glanced at her. “All three?” he repeated.

“Of course.” Had he expected her to come with only a third of her wardrobe? Uncle Bertram wouldn’t have given a second thought to anything she’d left behind, and would have likely tossed it into the garbage, or, if she was lucky, donated it to a church or charity.

And so Mama and Susannah had packed nearly every article of clothing she owned, along with multiple pairs of slippers and boots, every piece of her toilette, and every bottle of perfume and tin of powder she owned. The trunks also contained a healthy selection of books, some seeds from her favorite garden flowers, herbs, and vegetables, a sketch book and a set of watercolors and brushes, several ribbons and hats, treasured photographs and remembrances, and a few other things Susannah couldn’t bear to be without. Even Vernon, the butler, had helped after stumbling upon their secretive packing, fetching her the third trunk from the attic and ensuring a carriage

arrived at just the right time after Uncle Bertram had left for his office.

Mr. Fletcher regarded her a moment. Susannah gave him a tentative smile. Should she not have brought so much? What had he expected her to arrive with?

But he said nothing, instead flagging down a porter for assistance. Susannah followed them across the platform to a wagon waiting nearby. How interesting that he'd brought a wagon instead of a carriage. Perhaps this was normal for life in the country, though. A wagon did make more sense, as it could carry all manner of things, in addition to people.

As she waited for Mr. Fletcher to fetch her last trunk, Susannah wondered what else might differ from her expectations. Mr. Fletcher certainly didn't, at least, but she decided that she ought to be prepared for any number of unexpected surprises.

Her third trunk loaded onto the wagon, Mr. Fletcher assisted her with climbing aboard. Susannah arranged her skirts in a manner she hoped was becoming as he maneuvered into the driver's seat. The horses in front nickered, as if they'd grown weary waiting. But instead of putting the conveyance into motion, Mr. Fletcher held the lines in his hands and turned to Susannah.

"I don't know precisely how to approach this subject, as—clearly—this isn't something I've done before." His face grew a bit red. And his eyes, which were a shade of blue that matched the sky, darted away a moment before returning to Susannah.

"Go on," she said gently, hoping to give him courage to voice whatever it was he planned to tell her.

He cleared his throat. "What are your thoughts on marrying now? I know we've only just met, but the minister is here in town, and the ranch is a good few hours' drive away. And you certainly meet with my approval, so if I meet with yours . . .?" He trailed off, shifting in his seat.

Susannah's face grew warm. It was such an odd request, and yet it made sense under the circumstances.

"I'm sorry, I know that likely isn't the proposal of marriage you might have dreamed of as a girl," Mr. Fletcher said. "Forget I mentioned it. I have a housekeeper who can serve as a chaperon. We can wait—"

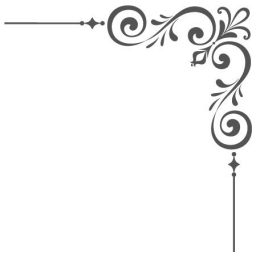
"Oh, no. I agree it sounds most practical to do so now."

His entire face appeared to light up as he nodded in agreement. "Then I'll take us to the church. It isn't far at all."

Susannah gripped the edge of the wagon as the horses began to move. She could hardly believe the words that had come from her mouth, and yet, she reminded herself, this was what she'd wanted.

This was why she'd traveled hundreds of miles—to be married. Mr. Fletcher certainly was handsome, and he seemed kind and well-mannered. Now was the time for bravery, not for questioning her decisions.

When she next wrote Mama, she would be Mrs. Jacob Fletcher.



Chapter Four

HE OUGHT TO HAVE INVITED his sister and her husband. That was the main thought in Jacob's mind throughout the short ceremony. But, he reasoned, they needed to marry immediately and waiting on Kate and Michael to finish their work in the hotel and make their way into town could delay them in arriving back to the ranch until after sunset.

No, it was better this way—just the two of them with Reverend Canton, Mrs. Canton, and their eldest son, Matthew, serving as witnesses. Just in case this was all a grave mistake.

But looking at Miss Hughes's radiant face, framed by the richest shade of chestnut brown hair, he could hardly believe that was a possibility. When she looked at him, all he could see was hope and happiness. It was hard to believe he could have found someone like her through an advertisement. He tried to imagine waking every morning to her smile, and a contentment he'd only felt once before—upon his return to the ranch after nearly a year away—filled him from head to toes.

When the minister pronounced them husband and wife, Jacob leaned forward and gave his new wife a chaste kiss. She froze, and it was quite possibly the most awkward moment of Jacob's life. But, he supposed that it was odd having just met someone and being obligated to let him kiss you. He reached for her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, and she glanced up at him with a grateful smile.

The ride to the ranch was long, but she kept up a lively conversation, exclaiming over various features in the land and pointing out birds and deer and rabbits. They had a good laugh when Jacob stumbled over what to call her, and, to his everlasting relief, she agreed it would make the most sense if they dispensed with any sort of awkward formality and simply called each other Jacob and Susannah. Her chatter made the ride pass quickly and diminished some of the anxiety that sat in the pit of Jacob's stomach.

When he pulled through the entry of the Silver Creek Ranch, he glanced at her to gauge her reaction. He needn't have worried, though, because Susannah smiled as she took in the house, the barn, and all the various other outbuildings that sat scattered around before the ranch stretched on in pastureland for acres and acres.

Jacob sat back and tried to see it through her eyes, but it was impossible. Every part of him was intricately connected to this place, from the bushy sagebrush to the little hills that rose here and there to the small cemetery where his parents were buried. He couldn't remove

this ranch from his blood even if he wanted to.

Simply put, it was home.

"It's lovely," Susannah finally said. "I tried to imagine it, but I couldn't, having never seen such a place before. But it's truly perfect, Jacob, the way it's nestled between these mountain ranges and the house and, well, just about everything!"

Jacob warmed at her appraisal. "Let's get you inside, then. I can show you around tomorrow, after you've had time to rest." He helped her down, relishing the feel of her smaller hand clasped in his.

They'd taken three steps away from the wagon when she squealed. Jacob halted, his eyes going down immediately to search for the cause of her fear. Seeing nothing but the mud from a recent, sorely-needed rain, he looked up. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing," she said, but the flat line her lips made as they pressed together indicated that it wasn't nothing at all. But she wasn't forthcoming with the reason, and so Jacob continued to lead the way to the house, her carpetbag slung over his shoulder.

She gasped and paused, forcing him to stop again.

He searched the ground a second time, but there was nothing but the churned up grass and mud. "Are you in pain?" he asked. That could be the only reasonable explanation.

She shook her head and attempted to step forward, only to pause and grimace again. When she noticed him still watching her, she finally said, "It's the mud."

He wrinkled his forehead. It was a ranch; of course there would be mud after a rain. But then Susannah lifted her skirts, just high enough to show him her shoes. They were dainty little things, made of some fussy material that was indistinguishable under the sandy Colorado mud that had accumulated on them. They were about the most impractical things Jacob had ever seen step foot onto the Silver Creek Ranch.

"You might do better to remove those altogether," he said.

She made a face that looked as if his words had speared her through the heart.

Jacob looked from Susannah to the door. If they carried on at this rate, it would be an hour before they arrived inside. "I do hope you brought something more practical," he said, a little sharper than he meant.

She gave him the most pitiful look. "I did."

There was only one solution. "Wait there," he said before hurrying to the porch to deposit her carpetbag. He returned quickly, scooped her up with one arm under her knees and the other under her shoulders, and carried her to the porch.

Susannah let out a little yelp of surprise, but she didn't complain.

When he set her down, safe from the mud on the porch, she smoothed her skirts, and looked at him sheepishly. “Thank you.”

He picked up her carpetbag, pausing a moment to wipe invisible dust from it in order to stop thinking about how nice it felt to hold her in his arms. Hoping he could trust his face to keep his thoughts hidden, he looked up to where she waited patiently in stocking feet. Her ruined shoes sat beside her on the porch.

“I can’t wait to see inside,” she said, bravely covering up any sadness about her once-pretty slippers.

He reached past her and opened the door. “My parents built this house. It’s served us well over the years, and I hope you’ll find it a comfortable home.”

Susannah stepped inside, and he watched as her eyes traveled across the hallway to the parlor. Her gaze lingered on a shelf with little items Jacob’s mother had collected during her lifetime. He hadn’t noticed the dust that had accumulated until now, but thankfully Susannah didn’t remark on his shoddy housekeeping. Dusting was the least of his worries with Mrs. Abbott laid up.

“The dining room is there.” He pointed to a door just beyond where they stood. “And the kitchen is in the rear. Mrs. Abbott is our cook and housekeeper, but I’m afraid she took an injury earlier in the summer, and the doctor insists she stay abed until the end of this month.”

“Oh, that’s terrible. I hope she isn’t in too much pain?” Susannah looked genuinely concerned about Mrs. Abbott’s welfare.

“It’s occasional now, or so she says. To be honest, sometimes I fear she diminishes what she feels in order to try to convince us all to let her get back to work.” Jacob’s gaze flicked up the stairs. “She’s recovering in the bedroom at the top of the stairs. There are two others. I have the one on the far left, and . . . well . . .” He resisted the urge to pull on his collar, instead clearing his throat and forcing himself to find the right words. “If you’d prefer to sleep in the unoccupied bedroom, I understand.”

Susannah’s face went a pleasing pink as she looked down at the floor. “I . . . thank you.”

He didn’t know what that answer meant, but he didn’t dare ask. “I’ll set your bag here and bring in your trunks later this evening, if that’s all right. I need to get out and check on the ranch.”

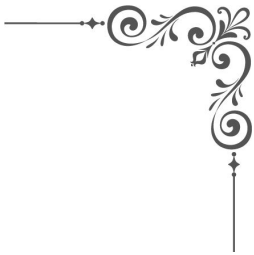
Susannah nodded as he put her back on the bottom step. “Thank you for everything. I feel very much at home.”

Her kind words lifted his heart. “Please, let me know if you find yourself in need of anything. I should be back before supper. We eat in a couple of hours, at six o’clock.”

Jacob gave her a last smile before leaving. She smiled in return,

her brown eyes sparkling, and that sweet, soft look was all he could think about as he unhitched the horses from the wagon.

In the span of only a few hours, Jacob Fletcher had gone from bachelor to married man—and he wasn't sure if there was much in this world that could make him any happier.



Chapter Five

AFTER JACOB LEFT, SUSANNAH found herself wishing he would return. It was odd being alone in an unfamiliar house. Although, she supposed she wasn't entirely alone, given that Mrs. Abbott was upstairs abed. And there must be another servant or two somewhere. Whoever they were, they were quite dismal at keeping house, considering the layers of dust on the shelving and furniture in the parlor.

Leaving her carpetbag on the step, Susannah decided to explore. It didn't take long to see the ground floor of the home. It was just the three rooms, plus what looked like a small office tucked away off the parlor. Despite the dust, and despite the debris that had accumulated on the floor from lack of sweeping, it was a perfectly nice house.

The furnishings weren't nearly as fine as Susannah's home in Louisville, and the house itself, while not small, wasn't as large as what she was used to. Yet, it had a comfortable feel. One needn't worry about wrinkling the silk throws or shattering a priceless crystal vase. No, this was a house made for living, Susannah decided.

She peered quickly into the kitchen, which was in need of a thorough cleaning, before scooping up her bag and heading upstairs. It felt too invasive of Jacob's privacy to look into his room, so she left his door shut and tiptoed past the housekeeper's room to find the room on the far right of the stairs. The bed needed airing, which Susannah hoped Jacob's servants might find a moment to do, even if was a half-hearted effort, but otherwise it was a perfectly fine room containing everything one might need. There was a pretty, carved wardrobe, a night table, a well-used but clean washbasin and pitcher, and even a little desk and chair. A window overlooked the front of the house, and Susannah could see the wagon and horses were gone.

Leaving her carpetbag behind to follow the rumble of her stomach, she found her way back to the kitchen. There was no bread, but there was a nice assortment of vegetables, which indicated that perhaps this Mrs. Abbott kept a garden. Susannah peered out the window, hoping to see it, and sure enough, there it was—a lovely looking garden filled with plants of various types and sizes.

She plucked a ripe tomato from its resting place on the windowsill and set to work cutting it and sprinkling it with a bit of salt she found in the pantry. It would make a nice little meal, considering she hadn't eaten a thing since breakfast. It wasn't as if she were particularly adept in actual cooking, so this would simply have to do.

Pleased with her find, she set the slices of tomato on a plate and brought it to the long dining room table. Before she sat, she ventured out onto the front porch. Just as she'd hoped, her trunks sat waiting there next to her ruined shoes. Susannah bent down, opened one of the trunks, and extracted a pair of sturdy yet fashionable boots. In another trunk, she found one of her favorite books. What better way to settle into her new home than to read a comforting story while enjoying a ripened tomato?

And enjoy it she did. After she finished, she marked her place in the book. It was oddly quiet in the house. Where had the servants been off to all this time? Were they also responsible for tidying the other buildings on this property? She couldn't imagine the work involved in that. Vernon, their butler back home, would sputter and turn bright red if they'd asked him to do such a thing.

She smiled at the thought and debated whether to change into fresh clothing or explore the garden behind the house. The allure of the garden won, and Susannah exited through the door in the kitchen.

The garden was all it promised to be from the window. Tomato vines held fruit in various stages of ripening, from green to orange. Vines of squash and melon ran across the ground. There were potatoes and carrots. Susannah's mouth watered at the thought of a creamy potato soup. She loved growing potatoes at home and giving them to the cook to create into something wonderful.

And the herbs! She bent down to examine the wild rows of parsley, rosemary, and mint. Oh, how she hoped Mrs. Abbott would let her help with this garden. And perhaps she could add some flowers around the outside of the house. How pretty the whitewashed wood could be with a few splashes of color against it! Some roses perhaps, or some cheerful sunflowers.

Her mind was drifting through ideas when the strangest noise came from behind her.

Susannah froze. She turned around slowly, and came face-to-face with a bird.

She tilted her head. It was a chicken. And not just one of them, but several. They stood there, blocking her path back to the house.

She'd seen chickens before, of course, but never this close. And certainly never behind her own house. Their cook had purchased eggs and chicken at the market.

"Shoo," she said, waving her hands at the birds. They didn't move. In fact, the one in front took another step toward her.

Susannah stepped backward, barely missing the herbs. "Go on now!"

The chickens didn't move away, instead pecking at the ground as if something good could be found in the dirt and grass and strange-

looking plants that Jacob had identified as sagebrush.

"Go, chickens! Go away!" Susannah waved her arms again, but all the birds did were cluck at her and peck at the ground.

She glanced behind her. She could wind her way through the garden and emerge on the other side. But then she'd still have to walk around it toward the chickens to get back into the house. Unless she went in the front. That was an option.

Mind made up, Susannah turned—only to find a chicken behind her.

How was she supposed get out now? She could hardly pick the creatures up and move them. Or could she? Susannah was contemplating whether it was likely they would peck at her hands when a voice came from the back porch.

"Susannah? What are you doing?"

She whipped around to see Jacob, still in his suit but with his boots covered in mud, standing behind the chickens. He pulled off his hat and slapped it against his thigh. The sun glinted against his hair, and Susannah's stomach lurched as her heart quickened. He looked every inch the confident rancher. And he must think her the silliest girl, finding her here, trapped by his chickens.

"I came to explore the garden but the chickens won't let me leave," she said, gesturing helplessly at the little beasts.

Jacob raised his eyebrows. "Did you walk through them?"

"Did I . . . No. Of course not." But even as she spoke, Susannah felt foolish. Why had she assumed they would attack her if she came too close to them? Jacob must think her utterly ridiculous.

Drawing in a deep breath, she took a step forward. Then another, and another until she drew even with the first chicken. The little creature didn't even seem to notice her, and so Susannah sprinted through the remaining bunch of them until she joined Jacob near the back porch.

He looked at her incredulously.

"I've never been that close to a chicken before," she said.

Jacob continued staring at her, and she had the distinct feeling he was forcing himself not to laugh. After an uncomfortable moment, he moved up the steps to the porch and gestured out at the yard. "What did you think of Mrs. Abbott's garden? I've tried to keep up with it."

"It's lovely," Susannah gushed as she joined him on the porch. "So many plants! I do hope she'll let me help with them."

"I'm certain she'll be grateful for that, especially now. It's a wonder I haven't killed them all with my ineptitude."

"You've done well by them," she said, and Jacob smiled, seemingly grateful for her compliment. Susannah hoped that made up for her fear of the chickens in his eyes.

His gaze lingered on her a moment, and just as Susannah grew warm under his perusal, he said, “I’m glad you’ve come here.”

Joy lit her up from the inside, causing a smile to burst upon her face. She had imagined so many possibilities on the long train ride here, but the reality was far better than she ever could have dreamed. Just wait until she wrote Mama!

Jacob removed his muddy boots on the porch, and then opened the door to the kitchen. Susannah followed him inside, only to to find herself running into his back when he stopped still. She stepped to the side, trying not to think about how he smelled of sunshine and earth and leather.

When he said nothing, she looked up at him, wondering what it was about the kitchen that had his mouth hanging agape. Her eyes traveled the length of the room, taking in the same mess that was here when she arrived.

Finally, he turned his stare toward her, and it was such a hard look, Susannah wanted to crumble. What could she possibly have done wrong? She’d barely been here two hours. She forced herself to square her shoulders and meet his gaze.

“The men will be here for supper in—” Jacob pulled a pocketwatch from an inside jacket pocket—“twenty minutes.”

“Yes, six o’clock, correct?” Susannah still wasn’t certain what Jacob was trying to tell her. Perhaps he’d wanted her to relay that information to whomever was in charge of cooking while Mrs. Abbott was recovering? Although she’d surmised the household servants knew the correct time for meals, so she hadn’t bothered trying to track them down to inform them. But maybe that’s exactly what she should have done. She was in charge of the house now, after all.

“I’m sorry, I made the assumption that your staff understood when the meals were scheduled, but I ought to have found them and introduced myself and made certain they knew you expected dinner at six.” She paused and glanced around the room. “But it’s odd—I haven’t seen any of them since I arrived.”

Jacob still stared at her. He blinked as if he didn’t comprehend what she’d said. “My staff? Do you mean the ranch hands?”

Susannah laughed. “No, of course not! I know Mrs. Abbott is upstairs abed, but I never did see any maid or butler or . . .” She stopped speaking as Jacob gave a short laugh. Uncertain what was so funny, she clasped her hands together and waited for an explanation.

Jacob ran a hand through his hair, closing his eyes a moment. When he spoke, it was in a slow, measured voice. “We have no such thing here at the Silver Creek Ranch. As the lady of the house, you have charge of such things.”

Now it was Susannah’s turn to blink at him. *She* had charge of such

things. “By ‘charge of,’ do you mean . . .?” She knew as she spoke that what he certainly didn’t mean was organizing a household staff to ensure the completion of chores.

“You are the one solely in charge of cooking and keeping house,” he said slowly, as if he still couldn’t believe she’d thought otherwise.

Susannah went cold with the realization of how much work he expected her to do—all on her own. She was supposed to have cooked up a meal—not just for the two of them, but for an entire horde of hungry men. And the house . . . the dust and the mess in the kitchen and—oh! Even the plate she’d left on the dining table!—that was all her responsibility too.

She must have looked utterly appalled, because Jacob quickly added, “Normally you’ll have the help of Mrs. Abbott, of course.”

Normally, as in not right now. At this moment, the entire house was Susannah’s responsibility. She was housekeeper, maid, butler, everything! She pressed a hand to her stomach as the enormity of her purpose here sank in.

Jacob’s irritated expression disappeared. “Are you all right?”

Susannah nodded slowly.

He shifted his stance, still appearing concerned for her but with an air of impatience.

Because who only knew how many men were arriving for supper in less than twenty minutes! Susannah thought she might be sick at the thought.

“Jacob,” she said quietly, her voice trembling just a little at the edges. When he looked at her again, she continued with her confession. “I fear I don’t know how to cook. Or how to clean a house, for that matter.”

He nodded slowly, as if he didn’t entirely understand what she said.

“I can’t cook for your men, because I don’t know how to do so.” It felt so ridiculous, saying such a thing out loud. Susannah had never felt so useless in her life.

He drew in a deep breath, and thankfully said nothing to express his irritation or disappointment. “I misunderstood.” He pressed his lips together, and for a moment, she thought he’d suggest they get in the wagon so he could deposit her on the next rain back East.

But instead, he crossed the room to the pantry. “I ought to have introduced you to Mrs. Abbott. She should have understood your situation immediately. For now, the easiest thing to do is make a soup with those vegetables. We had an abundance of eggs this morning. The remainder are in the pantry. You can fry those up quickly while the soup simmers. I’ll see if I can delay the men a few minutes.”

Susannah had a million questions, but asked only one. “How do I

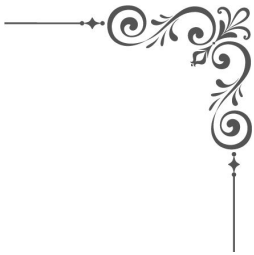
start the soup?"

He blinked at her again and cocked his head. "Didn't you say you enjoyed a wide variety of soups in your letter? And that you grew tomatoes?"

"Well, yes. But for eating, not for actually cooking. And I grew vegetables for the simple joy of growing them." Her face grew warm as she spoke.

"Yes. Yes, of course," Jacob said more to himself than to her.

He gave her quick instructions for the soup, and then disappeared back out the door, leaving her alone in a room filled with items she hadn't the slightest idea how to use.



Chapter Six

WHAT HAD HE DONE?

That was all Jacob could think as he strode to the bunkhouse, delivered the news that dinner would be delayed, and made his way back to the house after helping one of the men bring in the horses.

What had he missed in her letter? He'd read it many times, but not once had he caught that she was some sort of pampered socialite, dependent upon an army of servants to keep a home running. And what had ever made her think that the ranch would be such a place?

Perhaps he ought to have explained his expectations instead of assuming she knew. He could have introduced her to Mrs. Abbott, given more explicit instructions . . . but would that have helped?

As he stepped into the kitchen, the answer was clearly no.

Susannah stood in front of a pot that she was slowly filling with awkwardly cut vegetables while eggs burned in a frying pan. Jacob dashed over to rescue the eggs, adding them to a pile of their equally charred companions. They'd be cold before the soup was ready, but it was too late to do anything about that now.

"Thank you," Susannah said cheerfully as she stirred the pot that was merrily bubbling away.

Jacob resisted peering inside. It couldn't be too terrible, after all. It was difficult to mess up vegetable soup. Even he could put a decent pot of it together.

"I'll introduce you to Mrs. Abbott tonight," he said. It was a grudging admission that he ought to have offered her more insight into how the ranch ran.

"Oh, that would be wonderful. I look forward to meeting her." She looked up at Jacob, her expression guarded. "Did I understand correctly that this is something I should do every evening?"

Jacob drew a deep breath, trying to put himself into her position, which wasn't the easiest thing at the moment considering the burnt eggs and the last-minute supper. "Yes. Along with breakfast. Mrs. Abbott also usually packs up something for the men to take and eat in the middle of the day. But she can tell you more about that."

Susannah stared at him as if he were telling her that he needed her to climb up one of the peaks to the west. "I see," she said in a small voice.

It wasn't long before the first of the men came streaming into the house, ready for dinner. Each one was polite as Jacob introduced Susannah, and they all greeted her enthusiastically as she dished out

soup into their bowls.

"I must apologize for the eggs, gentlemen," she said as she sat down at the table with her own bowl of soup and plate of blackened eggs. "I hope they aren't too inedible."

Jacob had to give the men credit. When the taste was more than each one could bear, they hid their mouths behind hands or napkins, effectively shielding how genuinely awful they were from Susannah's view.

Jacob forced himself to eat his eggs in two bites. As he chewed, he noticed that Susannah merely nibbled at hers before pushing her plate aside in favor of her bowl of soup.

Spoon poised over her bowl, Susannah turned to the man next to her who'd just taken a swallow of soup and looked mighty confused at his bowl afterward. "Mr. Furman, have you been here at the ranch very long?"

Mr. Furman nodded as he swallowed another spoonful, and Jacob glanced down at his own bowl, wary of what might be contained beneath the very clear broth and the hunks of vegetables.

"Going on four years now, ma'am," Furman said. "I was hired on by Mr. Fletcher's sister before he came back."

"How wonderful!" Susannah exclaimed with more interest than Jacob could imagine anyone mustering over a ranch hand's work.

He lifted a spoonful of the soup to his mouth as Susannah asked Furman what he liked best about his work.

Furman thought for a moment as Jacob chewed a half-cooked piece of potato and swallowed broth that had no taste whatsoever. Susannah hadn't added any meat or soupbone to the broth, or even any salt. The "soup" was simply water and vegetables.

"I suppose I like riding out in the valley best of all, checking on the cattle. I like the wide open space and the sunshine," Furman said.

Jacob nearly forgot about the bland soup in his mouth as Furman spoke. He'd always asked Furman to help with the fencing and the horses and the other work that needed doing closer to the ranch. Who knew he preferred to be out on the land?

"I think that sounds just lovely," Susannah said as if Furman had recited a piece of poetry. "How about you, Mr. Bardsley?"

Jacob watched in awe, his soup forgotten, as Bardsley spoke of tending to the cattle and helping with the horses' medical needs. And on it went, Susannah working some sort of magic with her simple charm and grace, making easy friends of each and every one of the ranch hands. Even Old Mr. Nalley, who only worked with them seasonally, watched her in approval—and he wasn't one who was easy to please.

Despite the terrible supper, the men thanked her profusely and told

her how happy they were she was here. More than one said he was greatly looking forward to breakfast in the morning.

Susannah saw them all out before returning to the pile of dishes and dirty cookware in the kitchen. She eyed them as if she hoped they might clean themselves. Then she gave Jacob a hopeful look. “Might we go speak with Mrs. Abbott first?”

Jacob couldn’t help it. The entire situation was so preposterous and had turned out so unlike he’d pictured, that he burst into laughter.

“May I ask what has you so tickled?” she said with her arms crossed. But her eyes were alight with merriment, and it wasn’t long before she laughed too. “The soup wasn’t very good at all, was it?”

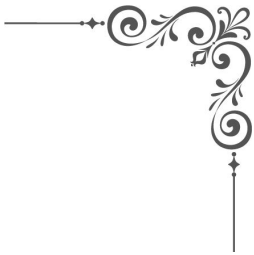
“It wasn’t,” Jacob replied truthfully. “But I doubt any of the men cared after you engaged them in such lively conversation. You could make them charred eggs every day, and they’d come begging for more.”

“You’re teasing me,” she said.

“I am not,” he said before stepping toward the pantry to find something edible to feed poor Mrs. Abbott. “Those men all love you. As I’m sure Mrs. Abbott will too. I’ll bring you up to meet her.”

She gave him a smile so sweet it nearly made him forget that she was hardly the “capable” woman for whom he’d advertised.

For all of her unexpected faults, Susannah certainly was intriguing.



Chapter Seven

MRS. ABBOTT WAS NOTHING but kind and encouraging, and Susannah awoke the next morning with a determination of the like she'd never felt before in her life.

Jacob had brought up her trunks last night, one at a time, and had blessedly not said another word about how much she'd brought—or the fact that she'd chosen the empty bedroom for herself. His expression had been unreadable when he'd learned that information, but Susannah thought she'd seen a momentary disappointment cross his face before quickly disappearing.

It left her feeling partially guilty and partially relieved, and she wasn't entirely certain she understood either emotion. But there had been no time to dwell on those thoughts with all of the information Mrs. Abbott had given her.

The older woman seemed to enjoy their long talk, and even Jacob had mentioned that she looked more vivacious than she had in a while when he checked in on her after Susannah left. At least Susannah's ineptitude at keeping house had made Mrs. Abbott feel more necessary and missed, she figured. It was one of those silver linings Mama always loved to remind her about. Perhaps Susannah's presence here—and her struggle to become what Jacob wanted her to be—would help Mrs. Abbott recover more quickly.

Susannah certainly hoped so. Learning all of this and remembering everything would be much easier with the help of another person who was more accustomed to the work. Besides, she quite liked Mrs. Abbott. She was cheerful and motherly, and Susannah looked forward to visiting her again when she brought up breakfast later.

But for now, she had to actually *make* that breakfast. She draped one of Mrs. Abbott's aprons around her neck—a lesson learned from last night when she'd found egg spattered across her skirts later on—and got to work.

First, she had to face down those chickens.

As she stepped out into the chill morning air—far cooler than an August morning ever felt back home—Susannah rubbed her hands along her arms and determined she *could* do this. Just the thought of Jacob finding her cowering from the chickens yesterday was enough to make her wish to hide in the garden. It was nothing short of a miracle that he hadn't sent her right on back to Kentucky.

Why hadn't he?

The question echoed in Susannah's mind as she let her gaze settle

on the low, dark mountains off to the east, the ones that looked like younger cousins to the grand, rugged mountains that stretched to the west in front of the house.

He hadn't sent her home.

It was a puzzle of sorts. He'd clearly been annoyed by her inability in the kitchen, and yet he'd been nothing but kind after that travesty of a dinner, even going so far as to compliment her kindness toward his men. And that had been nothing at all—being friendly was something that came naturally to Susannah. Besides, meeting new people was one of the greatest joys in life, especially when they led such different, fascinating lives.

Deciding she'd put the inevitable off for long enough, Susannah scooped up a basket, stepped down from the porch, and headed toward the henhouse. She wouldn't have even known the small wooden structure *was* a henhouse until Mrs. Abbott had told her such. The chickens made all sorts of noises from inside as Susannah approached.

Drawing in a breath to lend courage, Susannah opened the door to the henhouse. Mrs. Abbott had instructed her to simply reach under each hen to retrieve the egg. It hadn't sounded difficult at all when she'd explained it, but now, with those beady eyes staring at her, Susannah wasn't so sure.

"Please don't peck me," she said to the first hen, a pretty white creature Susannah had chosen because she looked the most innocent-looking of the bunch. Hesitating for just a moment, she pictured Jacob's disappointed face, and then carefully nudged her hand beneath the chicken.

Her fingers closed around an egg, which she retrieved with no interference from the hen. "Thank you," Susannah told the little white chicken gratefully. Her confidence bolstered, she collected ten more eggs.

Eggs safely nestled in the basket, Susannah grinned. "Thank you all!" she said to the chickens, as if they could understand her. But she didn't care how ridiculous she might sound, because, she, Susannah Hughes Fletcher, had just collected eggs!

Who knew that such a daunting task could actually be so simple? Or that it could give her such a thorough feeling of accomplishment? She felt as if she'd just finished reading a particularly long and cumbersome book.

After she deposited the eggs in the kitchen, she set to work gathering water, setting it to boil for cooked oats as Mrs. Abbott had instructed, and then carefully—very, very carefully this time—began cooking the eggs.

By the time Jacob returned with the men, Susannah had eggs,

ham, and cooked oats prepared. She grinned as the men each complimented the scents in the air and eagerly held out plates and bowls for food. Jacob brought up the rear of the line, and before he could leave for the table, she grabbed his arm.

"Please, will you taste it before you sit? If it's awful, I'd like to know now rather than see those poor men try to swallow bland oats or overcooked eggs and look happy about it."

She must have looked desperate enough that Jacob didn't even question her request. Instead, he set down his bowl, took up a fork she handed him, and tasted each item. He chewed for a moment, his expression giving nothing away.

"Well?" Susannah said impatiently. "Is it terrible? It *is* terrible, isn't it? I should have known. I don't know that I'll ever understand how to cook properly."

Jacob set the fork down and rested his hand on her arm. "It's good, Susannah. I promise."

She blinked at him a moment, her panic slowly dwindling with the comforting feel of his warm hand encircling her wrist. "It is? Are you certain?"

He laughed. "Fairly certain. Mrs. Abbott is a good teacher, and you are an excellent student. Not a single man in there will have a thing to complain about—not that they *would* complain."

A rush of relief filled Susannah, and she nearly slumped against the table. "Oh, thank goodness!"

She instantly made up a plate and a bowl of oats for Mrs. Abbott, rushing upstairs to deliver both the food and the news.

"I knew you could do it," the kindly older woman said as she sat up in bed. "You might just have a talent for cooking."

"I don't know about that," Susannah said with a laugh. "But I'm quite happy to be able to give the men something they can actually enjoy eating."

"I'm certain Jacob was proud of you too," Mrs. Abbott added.

Susannah turned, hoping to hide the warmth that flooded her cheeks. "Perhaps."

"Now you should get on back down there and enjoy your own breakfast." Mrs. Abbott shooed her from the room, and Susannah rejoined the group just as the men were finishing.

"The eggs were just perfect, Mrs. Fletcher," Mr. Furman said as he stood from the table.

"Thank you, Mr. Furman," she replied, trying not to convey just how happy the compliment made her.

"That ham fried up better than you ever fried it, Fletcher," one of the other men said to Jacob.

"Well, then it's a good thing you don't have to rely on me to get

the food on the table anymore," Jacob replied with a smile directed at Susannah.

And if the compliments from the men hadn't made her feel like the most accomplished woman in all the country, Jacob's smile certainly did.

"I'm glad you all enjoyed it," Susannah said, hoping her face wasn't as pink as it felt.

Jacob stood, his plate in his hand. "Are you all going to stand there reminiscing over breakfast, or are you going to pick up your lunch pails and get to work?" His voice was serious but laced with a humor that made Susannah grin—until she realized what exactly he'd said.

The lunch pails.

She clapped a hand over her mouth as the men streamed from the dining room into the kitchen.

"Jacob?" she said hesitantly, just as one of the men called out, "I don't see the lunch pails."

Jacob turned to her, clearly waiting for her to tell them where she'd put their lunches.

The lunches she hadn't made.

"I— I forgot," she said in a whisper.

He drew in a breath and she could tell he was fighting for patience. His jaw clenched, and he glanced briefly into the kitchen where the men waited before turning back to her. "It's all right," he finally said, although Susannah wondered if it really was.

Her mind spun as she desperately tried to think of a solution. "I saw some cheese in the pantry. And apples—there are several apples. And . . . and . . ."

"Did you make bread?"

Susannah shook her head. "Not yet. Mrs. Abbott was going to tell me how to do that later today. Oh! Crackers! I know I saw some crackers." With that, she bustled from the dining room, on a mission to create the fastest batch of lunches she supposed anyone ever had.

Jacob took up a knife and sliced the cheese as Susannah quickly deposited an apple in each pail and wrapped up a good stack of crackers for each man.

"I promise that tomorrow you'll each have a better lunch. Thank you so much for being so patient with me," she said as she handed Mr. Furman his pail.

"We're all grateful to have you here, ma'am," he said, taking the pail as reverently as if she'd given him a plate of roast beef and steaming sweet potatoes with honey.

Susannah smiled at him. "You're all so kind to me. Thank you." She bid them each farewell as they left, reminding Mr. Ising to write his sweetheart in Canon City and telling Mr. Bardsley that she hoped

the little calf he'd worried on that morning would improve.

Jacob paused awkwardly by the door, almost as if he weren't certain if he should stay or leave.

"Don't you have work that needs doing?" Susannah asked gently. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel as if he needed to stay here and look after her.

"I do," he said. "I wanted . . . well . . ." He looked over her shoulder as if there were something interesting behind her.

Susannah turned, and saw nothing but the messy kitchen and the door to the dining room. "Yes?"

"I . . . I'll see you later today." And with that, he was gone, leaving Susannah with the distinct feeling he'd left something unsaid.

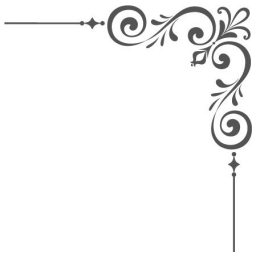
She looked after him a moment as he made his way around the porch and toward the barn. When he was gone, she shut the door and leaned back against it. Never in her life had she been so exhausted this early in the morning. Why, it was as if she'd lived an entire day in only two hours! If she were home, she'd simply retire to bed.

But *this* was home now. And taking to her bed was not an option, not unless she wanted to disappoint Jacob and make him question—again—whether she truly belonged here.

And so she squared her shoulders and stood up straight, pressing a hand to her back. So much needed doing, it was hard to know where to start. Susannah took up the broom, sweeping crumbs and bits of dirt from the floor. If only Uncle Bertram could see her now!

She giggled at the thought. The work was hard, yes, but somehow, she didn't mind. No one ever needed her at home. But here—here she was needed. And Jacob, Mrs. Abbott, and the men, they all appreciated her efforts, even when she fell short.

And being necessary felt nice.



Chapter Eight

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING here?" John Ising said the moment Jacob rode up.

He halted the horse near where Ising was watching over some of the cattle grazing nearby. "Last I checked, it's my ranch."

"That ain't what I meant." He gestured at the cattle in front of them. "They look good."

Jacob nodded. They'd fetch a good price this fall. "What did you mean?" he asked as he and Ising headed southwest toward the creek.

"All I know is that if I just married a pretty lady like Mrs. Fletcher, I'd been making all sorts of excuses to get back to the house." Ising kept his eyes ahead of him, presumably scanning the terrain for more of their cattle.

Jacob shifted the reins in his hand. It wasn't as if he hadn't thought of it. In fact, Susannah took up most of the space in his head lately. "I thought about asking her if she wanted to ride out and see the creek."

"Why didn't you?" Ising asked.

It was a good question, and one Jacob didn't really want to answer. He'd actually made the attempt to ask her that morning, but couldn't get the words out. "I don't know," he said instead.

Ising glanced at the sky. "Still got a good few hours of sunlight left."

The man was right—with what he'd said and what he'd left unsaid. If Jacob could run a ranch the size of the Silver Creek, surely he could ask his own wife if she wanted to ride down to the creek with him.

"All right," he said. "See you at supper."

Ising grinned at him. "Give my best to Mrs. Fletcher."

When Jacob arrived back at the house, he found Susannah hanging the wash out back. She greeted him with a wide smile as she stood on her tiptoes to pin a corner of the skirt he recognized from the day she'd arrived.

"Jacob! You'll never imagine what I've done today." She brushed her hands together and approached him.

"I can see you've done some washing." Jacob eyed the remaining pieces of clothing in the tub. Washing had been the most excruciating task he'd taken over since Mrs. Abbott's injury. He was grateful to give it up.

"I have! Would you believe I've never used a washboard before? I had to bring it upstairs so Mrs. Abbott could show me what to do. Oh! I also baked bread. I hope it tastes all right. And I cleaned up the

kitchen and I already started supper." She put her hands on her hips, looking so proud of herself that Jacob felt the urge to wrap his arms around her waist and kiss her right then and there.

Somewhat startled at that thought, he flashed a smile back to her. "That's quite impressive."

"Would you like to try the bread? I could cut you a slice."

"Oh, no— I mean, yes. No." Jacob shook his head. How hard could it be to ask her to spend some time with him?

Susannah blinked at him, her head tilted in confusion.

"I came home to see if you'd like to take a ride down to the creek with me," he blurted out, the words almost tripping over themselves.

"Oh!" Susannah's mouth remained parted as she considered his request. Then she grinned at him. "I would love to. Let me check on supper and take off this apron. And I ought to make certain Mrs. Abbott is comfortable."

"Go on," Jacob said. "I'll bring up a horse."

From the corral, he selected an even-tempered mare called Queenie. Not knowing anything about Susannah's ability on horseback, she seemed the safest choice.

There was, Jacob mused as he saddled the horse, quite a lot he didn't know about Susannah. And he desperately wished to know more.

"What a beautiful horse!" Susannah said when she descended the back porch steps.

"This is Queenie." Jacob ran a hand down Queenie's nose and the horse nickered. "She was always one of my sister's favorites."

"Mr. Furman mentioned you have a sister." Susannah glanced at him as she patted Queenie.

"She lives in Crest Stone at the hotel with her husband. They both work there."

"I hope she's older and bossed you around," Susannah said with a sneaky grin.

Jacob laughed. "You'd be right on both accounts." He led Queenie to the porch steps. "Do you ride?"

"I'm hardly accomplished, but yes, I do. Although never on this sort of saddle." She eyed the saddle as if it were a puzzle that needed to be solved.

"Kate—that's my sister—occasionally rode with a leg crooked around the saddle horn," Jacob offered.

Susannah pulled herself into the saddle and arranged her legs as Jacob suggested. He mounted his own horse, Brewster, and led the way around the house and toward the creek.

They rode in silence for a while, but Jacob hardly noticed. Watching Susannah take in the sights of the valley was entertainment

enough. She wore an expression that varied between pleased and awed as they passed small hills, stands of aspen, and rabbits that scampered away from the horses' hooves.

"Are there bears here? Or wildcats?" she finally asked, looking to him with a curious expression.

He hesitated, not wanting to scare her and yet knowing it was important she remain aware, especially at night. "There are," he finally admitted. "We don't normally see them, but it's important to ensure the chickens and horses are put away at night. The coyotes, especially, will get the chickens.

Susannah nodded, biting her lip but not looking particularly troubled. Jacob let out a breath of relief. If neither the work nor the threat of wild animals had scared her yet, she just might turn out to be made for life on the ranch.

They reached the creek, and Jacob tied their horses to sturdy cottonwoods before extending a hand to Susannah. She blushed a pretty pink and took his hand. It was such a simple gesture, and yet Jacob felt as if it held layers upon layers of meaning. She trusted him to lead her, and he decided right then and there that he would never lead her astray.

He carefully picked a path around tree roots and rocks, and when they emerged from the trees, the creek before them came into view.

"This is Silver Creek," he said.

She didn't remove her hand from his as she surveyed the creek before them. "This is what you've named your ranch after."

"It is, although that honor goes to my parents. They chose the name when they claimed that piece of land." The creek burbled along its merry way, lower now than it had been earlier in the summer after the spring melt. It sparkled in the shafts of sunlight that pierced through the pines and cottonwoods, and here and there, little fish darted about.

"This is the most peaceful, lovely place." Susannah sighed. "May we sit here for a while?"

Jacob gestured at the ground in response, and held onto her hand as Susannah seated herself on the banks and arranged her skirts. He sat beside her and took her hand into his lap. He half expected her to pull it back, but she didn't.

"I can see why your parents chose to name the ranch after this creek," she said. "I must tell you, I'm a little jealous."

"Of what?" Jacob tilted his head.

"Your family," Susannah said matter-of-factly. "You had two parents and a sister. All I've ever had is my mother. And Uncle Bertram, but I wouldn't wish him on anyone." She paused. "Is your sister upset about missing the wedding? If I'd known, I'd have insisted

we wait."

A little dose of guilt crept up Jacob's spine. "Kate, uh . . . Well, she doesn't yet know we've married."

Susannah raised her eyebrows. "You haven't told her?"

"I'll write to her immediately." The last thing he wanted was Susannah fearing that he was embarrassed of her. "I'm sorry, it was all very sudden."

"I'd like to meet her," Susannah said, his faux pas seemingly forgotten. "I've always wished I had a sister."

"You'll like Kate. She's smart and a hard worker. She kept this ranch going alone for nearly a year, all for me." He smiled at the memory of his return to the Silver Creek a few years before.

"Where had you gone?" Susannah asked.

That was a memory he'd prefer to forget. "I was on my way to a ranch outside of Denver to look at some bulls up for purchase, but I never made it. The stage I'd taken was held up by outlaws. I got brave, and one of them shot me in the leg, but I fared better than the driver or the other passengers—they all wound up dead. When the marshal arrived, it all looked mighty suspicious to him. And it turned out I looked an awful lot like one of the outlaws who'd held up that stage one too many times. I ended up spending nearly a year in jail while they debated whether I was this man or not. Only when they finally caught the actual outlaw did they let me go. Nearly everyone here had assumed I was dead, but Kate never believed it to be true. She kept this place going."

Susannah's mouth was slightly open as he finished the tale, not certain whether to be more appalled by his injury or by the time he'd lost. "An entire year?" she finally said.

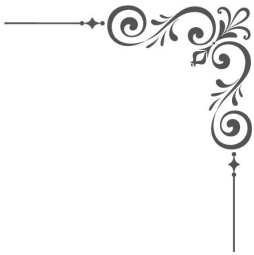
"Indeed." He grimaced at the memory of those long days, one fading into the next as the seasons changed without him. "I try not to think on it too much."

"I can see why." She shifted her hand in his and then squeezed his fingers. "You are very courageous, Jacob Fletcher. I don't know that I would have survived such an ordeal."

He gave her a smile. "Enough of my trials. Tell me about this uncle you dislike so much."

A shadow crossed Susannah's normally cheerful face, and even though Jacob hadn't even known of this uncle's existence until today, he wanted nothing more than to send a fist into the man's face for making Susannah feel anything other than happy.

"Uncle Bertram is the reason I never married," she began.



Chapter Nine

THINKING ABOUT UNCLE Bertram while sitting by the lovely stream, under the clear blue sky, and in the middle of cheerful birdsong was like having ants stroll into a perfectly fine picnic.

Susannah drew in a deep breath. Jacob was waiting patiently, but his face had turned down into a frown. He had come from a kind and loving family. How could he picture an uncle like hers?

"Uncle Bertram is my father's brother. My father passed when I was a little girl. I don't much remember him, although my mother spoke of him often. He was, apparently, nothing like his brother, which eases my heart when I try to picture him." Mama's stories of the father Susannah couldn't remember were all warm and cozy, like Christmas morning, and Susannah relished knowing her father was a good man.

"What did this uncle of yours do?" Jacob's voice held a barely-disguised edge.

"Oh, nothing cruel—not directly, at least," Susannah said quickly. "He berated each man who came to call on me, making him feel as if he could never have enough money, a big enough home, or important enough work to be worthy enough of my hand. At first, I thought it was because he felt protective of me, but that wasn't the reason." Her heart constricted when she remembered how helpless she'd felt. "He feared losing my father's money."

Jacob nodded slowly. "He had control of it until you married?"

"Yes. And that's why he never found any suitor agreeable."

Jacob furrowed his brow. "So you gave up your rightful inheritance to come here and marry me instead."

"I wanted to marry, to have a family," Susannah said quietly. "If I remained in Louisville, I feared I would never have that opportunity."

"Is it terrible that I'm thankful you turned to advertisements in a matrimonial newspaper instead?" Jacob asked with a teasing smile.

"Not at all. Although I miss my mother, I'm rather happy with my decision." And it was the truth. Despite the unexpected hard work, Susannah had never felt more content than she did here. "I am sorry that I don't know more about keeping a home, though. Mrs. Abbott has been tremendously helpful to me. She told me her birthday is four days from now. Do you have anything planned?"

She could immediately tell from Jacob's startled face that he didn't. "I should have remembered that. She's been with our family for as long as I can remember."

“Well, then we must celebrate it in some way. I wish I could bake a cake, but I’d have to ask her for instructions and that would ruin the surprise.” It was yet another thing Susannah didn’t know. For a woman who was educated in the finest schools the city had to offer and raised among the best sorts of people, it was astounding how much she didn’t know at all about daily living. Sometime it frustrated her, although she tried to remain patient with herself.

“You may not have to ask,” Jacob said. “Kate loved baking. She kept her favorite receipts written down on scraps of paper in the kitchen. She’d committed most of them to memory by the time she married and didn’t take the receipts with her. I’ve spotted Mrs. Abbott pulling them out from time to time. Perhaps she has one for cake.”

Susannah grinned. “I do hope so! I have a few other ideas, but let me think on them for a bit.” She contemplated various ideas to make Mrs. Abbott’s birthday a festive occasion until she felt Jacob watching her. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “Nothing of importance, anyhow. Thank you for thinking of Mrs. Abbott, though. You have a big heart, Susannah.”

It was such a kind compliment that Susannah hardly knew how to respond. She murmured a thank you before ducking her head to examine the sandy dirt and rocks and tiny green plants on the ground.

They were quiet for a while. A slight breeze lifted the tendrils of Susannah’s hair that had snuck out of her chignon. Jacob’s thumb traced circles on her hand, a feeling so mesmerizing that Susannah thought she could fall asleep right there beside him on the banks of the creek.

When she turned to glance up at Jacob, she found him watching her instead of the creek. None of the suitors she’d had before marrying Jacob had ever looked at her in this way—as if she were something more precious than any property or money. Not knowing entirely how to react, she gave him a smile.

He returned the smile and lifted his free hand to cup her cheek. Susannah stilled. It was such a sweet, intimate gesture, the feeling of his warm hand resting against her cheek. She was torn between wishing he might try to kiss her and thinking she ought to pull away before he did.

Did she want him to try? She honestly didn’t know. It was hard to think straight with the way he held her and with how his eyes seemed to see right into her heart. She thought she might like him to kiss her —he was her husband, wasn’t he? But when she wondered what it might be like, her heart hammered so hard that she almost feared being that close to him.

The fear rose in her now, even as his kind blue eyes traced her face

as if he were trying to memorize it. She barely knew him, after all. They'd only just met. It was too much, too soon, and she thought her heart might burst out of her chest if this went on any longer.

And so she pulled away and jumped up. "I'd like to take a stroll beside the creek, if it's all right with you."

Startled, he rose slowly as if he was waking from a dream. "Of course." He paused a moment, and just as Susannah wondered if he was going to remark upon what had just happened, he extended his arm. She took it, wrapping her own arm around his, and said a little prayer of thanks—for his understanding and for her own relief.

But even as they strolled along the creek bank, Jacob pointing out various birds and trees, Susannah's gaze kept wandering toward Jacob's lips.

And she almost wished she *had* let him kiss her.

MRS. ABBOTT'S BIRTHDAY celebration was shaping up to be quite the event at the Silver Creek Ranch. Just as Jacob had indicated, Kate's reliable dessert receipts were tucked in a nook between the wall and the sugar tin. Susannah found a simple receipt for apple cake, and, under the guise of preparing a pie, found the answers to any questions she had about baking from Mrs. Abbott without the housekeeper knowing about the planned surprise.

Jacob had suggested Mrs. Abbott's favorite meal—fried chicken—which, thankfully, he was able to show Susannah how to make. That, along with squash and potatoes, would make a hearty birthday meal. Using the thread and needles she'd brought in her trunks, Susannah stayed up late embroidering an image of Mrs. Abbott's favorite flower, a wild violet. And Jacob had been up to something in the barn that Susannah was certain was a surprise for the housekeeper.

Susannah thoroughly enjoyed the preparations, particularly since they involved planning with Jacob and the ranch hands. She'd always enjoyed celebrating Mama's birthday, but she'd done that alone. Uncle Bertram barely acknowledged birthdays. It was nice to have others excited about the secret.

As soon as Jacob headed out with the men and she'd cleaned up from breakfast, Susannah got to work on the cake. It came out a beautiful toasted color, and cutting a small bit from the bottom where no one would notice, Susannah gave it a taste. To her relief, not only was it edible, but it was *good*. It might possibly have been the first truly tasty dish she'd ever made.

She set the cake aside to cool, hoping that the apple scent didn't reach Mrs. Abbott's room upstairs. With the cake finished, she had a few hours to finish her embroidery and complete a few necessary

chores before starting supper.

With the last of the chicken sizzling in the pan and the steam wafting up from the potatoes and squash, Jacob arrived home carrying something behind his back.

"Is that a gift for Mrs. Abbott?" Susannah asked as she turned a piece of chicken over in the oil. "I know you've been up to something in the barn."

"It is." A little grin spread across his face. "But in a way, it's for you too."

Susannah gave him a puzzled look as she wiped her hands on her apron. "Well, that has me curious."

Pulling his hand from behind his back he held out a small frame. Susannah drew in a breath. It was truly a beautiful creation, the wood sanded smooth and the pieces fit perfectly together. A small bit of twine was fastened to the back to create a hanger of sorts. "It's lovely, Jacob."

"It's to frame that flower you embroidered for Mrs. Abbott."

"Oh, it's perfect!" Susannah took the pretty little frame and turned it over to admire it. "I have the embroidery in the parlor. Let me finish this chicken and I'll fetch it."

She quickly retrieved the finished chicken from the pan, cleaned off her hands, and placed the wild violet into the frame while Jacob cleaned up for supper.

Before long, all of the men had arrived for supper. Grinning at each other in anticipation of the celebration to come, they waited patiently while Susannah dished up a plate of chicken, potatoes, and squash for Mrs. Abbott. She set a slice of cake on another plate. Jacob took up both plates while Susannah carried Mrs. Abbott's gift, and then the entire group climbed the steps.

Susannah knocked on Mrs. Abbott's door, and finding her ready and eager for company, she opened the door farther to show the entire group waiting outside. Mrs. Abbott's eyes widened in surprise.

"What is this?" she said, looking from Susannah to Jacob.

"Happy birthday!" Susannah said, placing a wooden tray over Mrs. Abbott's lap. Jacob set both plates before her as Susannah poured some water from the pitcher that sat nearby.

"I thought I smelled frying chicken! And apple cake! Susannah, did you make all of this?" Mrs. Abbott asked, a smile crinkling her eyes.

"I did. And that isn't all . . ." She handed Mrs. Abbott the framed embroidery.

"Oh! My favorite flower. And that frame!" The older woman's hands traced the smooth wood of the frame as she took in the little flower stitched between the wood.

"Jacob made the frame," Susannah said.

“It’s just lovely.” Mrs. Abbott’s eyes grew misty as she looked up at them.

“And I believe we have one more surprise,” Jacob added, looking to the men gathered outside the door.

With that, Mr. Furman started singing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound . . .” And the other men quickly joined in. With a grin, Susannah and Jacob also began to sing Mrs. Abbott’s favorite hymn.

Mrs. Abbott wiped her eyes as she smiled at the lot of them. “I never would have expected this. Thank you so much.”

“It was all Susannah’s idea,” Jacob said, giving Susannah a warm smile. “She planned everything, from the cake to the hymn.”

“I only wanted you know how much we appreciate you,” Susannah said.

“Thank you, dear.” Mrs. Abbott reached up and squeezed her arm. “You are a blessing to this house.”

Susannah’s face went warm. She wasn’t certain that she was a blessing, but it was nice to hear Mrs. Abbott say so.

“I must agree with Mrs. Abbott,” Jacob said quietly, low enough that the men outside the door couldn’t hear.

Susannah blushed even more, and she bustled about the room, pouring Mrs. Abbott more water and straightening the plates on the tray. “Enjoy your dinner, and I’ll be up again as soon as I get these men fed.”

After hurrying the men back down the stairs to let Mrs. Abbott eat, Jacob caught Susannah’s arm at the bottom of the stairs. “Thank you,” he said.

His hand was warm through the fabric of her sleeve, and Susannah found herself wishing he might touch her face again. She wouldn’t be afraid of a kiss this time, she decided. There was no reason for fear, not in this place where she felt more at home than she ever had in the home she’d shared with Uncle Bertram.

“Mrs. Abbott has been like another mother to me since I arrived,” Susannah said. “I’d do anything for her.”

Jacob smiled. “That’s how I’ve always thought of her too. It’s a pity she never had children of her own, because they would have been very lucky to have her as a mother.”

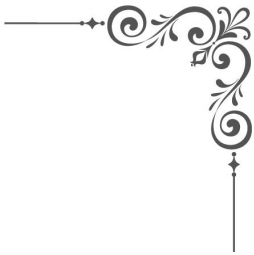
He still held her arm, and his eyes caught hers. Susannah’s breath went shallow as he held her gaze. She couldn’t have looked away from those blue eyes if she’d wanted to—and she didn’t want to. In fact, she thought she could stand there forever, lost in Jacob’s gaze.

He took another step toward her, and there was hardly any space that remained between them. A little spark of fear tried to ignite deep down inside Susannah, but she squelched it quickly. He was her husband, and he’d been nothing but kind, even though she still

stumbled through her work most days.

And just as she thought something *might* happen, a voice sounded from the kitchen. “Boss, we going to eat sometime tonight?”

A giggle rose up from somewhere deep inside Susannah, and before she could stop it, she was laughing out loud. Jacob shook his head and laughed too. Dropping his hand from her arm to her hand, he led her toward the kitchen and the crowd of hungry men that awaited.



Chapter Ten

THROUGHOUT THE REMAINDER of the week after Mrs. Abbott's birthday, Jacob felt as if he were walking through a world made of clouds. Everything at the ranch was moving along well, and it wouldn't be long before they'd be rounding up the cattle for sale. The warm weather was holding, Mrs. Abbott was healing well, and Susannah . . .

Jacob grinned to himself just thinking of her. Susannah had become an integral part of the ranch. Even though she'd only been there for a short time, it felt as if the ranch couldn't function without her presence. She'd settled into the rhythm of life and work at the Silver Creek, and the men thought the world of her.

And, Jacob had to admit, he did too. Each day she seemed to grow more beautiful to him. They'd developed an ease about each other, sitting up at night in the parlor sometimes to talk about the day, plans for the future, and their lives before they'd known each other. He'd wanted so badly to kiss her but had held back. She'd seemed frightened that afternoon by the creek, and so he'd promised himself he wouldn't push her.

But each day, it grew harder and harder to resist, and he found himself dreaming about sweeping her up in his arms and kissing her until she was breathless.

"Jacob?" Her sweet voice interrupted the latest iteration of the daydream. Jacob stood up straight from where he'd been leaning against one of the posts on the front porch, watching the sun go down.

Susannah had taken off her apron, which Jacob had learned meant her work was done for the night. "What are you doing out here?" she asked.

"Only watching the sunset." Well, and dreaming of her, but Jacob wasn't about to admit that. "Would you care to join me?"

"I would," she said with a smile and settled herself onto one of the nearby chairs.

Jacob joined her, and they sat in companionable silence for a few minutes.

"Tomorrow is Sunday," Susannah remarked.

"It is," Jacob replied, fairly certain he knew where this conversation was headed. "Would you like me to take you into town for church services?"

"Oh, could we?" She clasped her hands together. "I understand it's quite a distance and not something we can do every week, but I do

miss it so. Besides, I'd love to meet your sister and her husband."

He'd finally written Kate to tell her the news. Kate had immediately demanded to meet Susannah—after she'd chastised Jacob for not informing her of his marriage sooner. "I'll never hear the end of it if we don't visit Kate. And perhaps we could pay a visit to your friend?" One evening as they sat in the parlor, she'd told Jacob of a friend who'd come to Crest Stone to work in the hotel, only to wind up married to the hotel's builder. They had recently welcomed a baby.

"That sounds perfectly lovely. I'll pack us up a lunch to bring into town," Susannah said.

"If you'd like, although I'm certain Kate and Michael will ask us to eat at the hotel with them."

Susannah's eyes sparkled at that idea. "It's been so long since I've eaten at a restaurant!"

Jacob grinned. Susannah had adapted so quickly to ranch life that sometimes he forgot the luxuries she might be missing from her previous life. Seeing her enthusiasm now, he decided this outing might be a nice opportunity to let her purchase some comforts from the mercantile.

Jacob took her hand, and together they watched as the sun sank below the horizon.

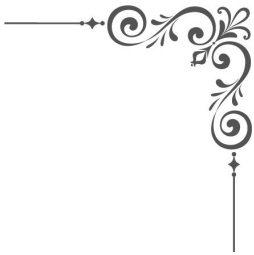
Susannah rose from her seat. "I suppose we'll be needing to leave early tomorrow."

"We will, if we want to have hope of reaching the church in time."

"Then I believe I will get some sleep." Susannah paused and gave him a little smile. "Thank you for this. I'm looking forward to it." Then, before he could reply, she leaned down, gave him a quick kiss on the lips, and disappeared into the house.

Jacob sat, frozen to his chair. Had that actually just happened? He pressed a hand to his mouth. *She* had kissed *him*.

Perhaps he ought to offer to take her into town more often.



Chapter Eleven

THE CHURCH SERVICE was uplifting and exactly what Susannah was hoping it would be. Even better, Emma, her husband, and their baby were present. When the service ended, Susannah waited impatiently with Jacob at her side for the little family to make their way down the aisle. As soon as Emma was close enough, Susannah threw her arms around her old friend.

"It's been so long!" Emma said as she hugged Susannah back. "Here, you must meet my husband, Monroe Hartley, and this is our baby boy, Monroe Junior. We call him Row."

Susannah introduced Jacob to the Hartleys before reaching out to take the sweet, sleeping baby from Mr. Hartley.

"Oh, he's just perfect!" Susannah stroked the little one's tiny fingers.

"We're awfully proud of him," Mr. Hartley said. Looking to Jacob, he added, "It's good to finally meet you, Fletcher. Your sister and brother-in-law have been more than kind to Emma and myself. Especially considering how we broke most of their rules by courting." He glanced at Emma with a little grin, and she turned pink.

As they conversed, Susannah delighted in seeing how happy Emma appeared. Emma had always been so kind to Susannah and to everyone they'd known back home, and Susannah couldn't think of anyone more deserving of happiness.

The baby began to fuss, and Emma and her husband excused themselves with invitations to visit anytime.

"I imagine Kate and Michael were caught up in work up at the hotel," Jacob said. "Why don't we walk up there and see if we can't find them?"

Susannah took the elbow he extended, and as they walked along the edge of the road where sidewalks had yet to exist, she admired the little town she hadn't seen since the day she'd arrived. It wasn't much at all, compared to Louisville, which had been in existence for a hundred years, but Crest Stone had a certain charm to it. Everything here was new, save for a handful of buildings, and it was nestled so nicely against the towering Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The hotel especially, up on a hill, looked so grand. Susannah could hardly wait to see inside.

Jacob offered to pay for a carriage to take them up to the hotel, but Susannah declined. "The weather is nice, and I'm enjoying our little stroll."

When they reached the hotel, Jacob pulled the door open, revealing a room with a soaring ceiling, meticulous woodwork, a grand staircase, and two large fireplaces that Susannah imagined would be cozy and welcoming come winter.

"Jacob!" A woman's voice sounded across the large room.

Susannah spotted her immediately, a lady about Jacob's age, with blonde hair curved up into a neat chignon. The woman immediately clapped a hand over her mouth as if she were afraid someone would take offense to her lack of decorum.

She walked sedately toward them, although Susannah could tell she was trying not to run—and Susannah decided right then and there that she quite liked Jacob's sister.

Kate threw her arms about her brother, much as Emma and Susannah had embraced back at the church. Kate took a step back and grasped Jacob's arms, giving him a good once-over. "You look well. I believe married life agrees with you."

Jacob's cheeks colored just a little, and Susannah hid a smile behind her hand. She didn't often see him embarrassed, and it was awfully endearing when she did.

"Kate, I'd like you to meet my wife, Susannah. Susannah, this is Kate McFarland, my sister." Jacob grinned at each of them.

Susannah inclined her head and murmured a greeting, but Kate made a *tsk* noise and Susannah found herself embraced in another hug.

"I finally have a sister," Kate said, her face radiant. "It's about time, Jacob."

"In my defense," he said, "there aren't a particularly large number of unmarried ladies in Crest Stone."

"Which is why Mrs. Gilbert and Mrs. Young's idea for advertisements is meeting with such success," Kate replied. She took up Susannah's hand. "Please call me Kate. And you must meet my husband."

She led them through the busy lobby and past the staircase where a hallway led to the rear of the building. Kate paused halfway down the hall to knock on a door.

"Come in," a male voice said, and she pushed open the door.

"Look who I've found out in the hotel," Kate announced.

"Jacob!" A man who looked as if he ate well rose from behind the desk to greet them. He had a friendly smile, dark hair shot through with strands of gray, a salt-and-pepper beard, and an accent that Susannah thought might be Irish.

"Michael." Jacob slapped the man on the back as they shook hands. "I'd like you to meet Mrs. Susannah Fletcher." He laid a hand on the small of Susannah's back as she smiled at Kate's husband.

“Mrs. Fletcher.” Mr. McFarland took her hand and held it between both of his. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I trust you’re settling into the ranch well?”

“I am,” Susannah replied. “Thanks to Jacob and dear Mrs. Abbott and all of the ranch hands. I’ve never felt so welcomed.”

“Hmm, must be nice.” Mr. McFarland gave a devious smile to Kate, who swatted at him.

“Susannah wasn’t trying to get my brother to sign away his land,” she said with an arch of her eyebrows.

Jacob leaned in to whisper into Susannah’s ear. “I’ll tell you that story later.”

Kate sent for tea and lunch, and they enjoyed a nice hour talking about the ranch, Susannah’s life in Louisville, the receipts Kate had left behind, and the hotel. And when the time came to leave, Susannah felt that she’d been part of this family her entire life.

“I adore your sister and brother-in-law,” she said to Jacob as they left the hotel. “I wish they lived closer.”

“It would be nice,” Jacob said with a smile. “Although Kate might drive me to distraction.”

Susannah couldn’t imagine that, but then again, she’d never had a sibling.

He led the way to the mercantile, where Susannah met the friendly proprietors, a Mr. and Mrs. Drexel, and enjoyed looking at all of the items they had for sale. Jacob gave the Drexels the list of necessities that Susannah had created earlier, and then surprised Susannah by telling her to choose a few little things she might enjoy having.

“Are you certain?” she asked, her eyes lingering on a lovely brush and mirror set.

He smiled at her. “I want you to be happy.”

“But I am happy. There is nothing I could buy here that would make me happier than I already am.” It was the absolute truth, and it was something Susannah herself might not have believed two months ago. Back then, she couldn’t have imagined living without a butler and several maids, much less a brush and mirror set.

“I’m thrilled to hear that, but I’d still like to purchase something for you.” Jacob picked up the mirror Susannah had been looking at. It was silver, and the way the metal curled and curved along the edges made it catch the light. “I saw you looking at this. Do you like it?”

Susannah nodded. “But it isn’t anything I need.”

“This isn’t about what you need,” Jacob said. He picked up the matching brush. “Now, is there anything you like better?”

Susannah glanced about the store and shook her head.

“Then this brush and mirror set it is.” Jacob led the way to the counter where Mrs. Drexel wrapped the items carefully in paper, tied

them with a string, and handed them back to Susannah.

Outside, Jacob had retrieved their wagon and horses from the livery and loaded their other purchases into the back. Susannah carefully placed her brush and mirror set between two other items where they wouldn't be jostled too badly as the wagon rode over bumps and rocks on the way home.

As they headed out of town, Susannah clapped a hand to her hat and looked behind them. The little town faded into the distance and she smiled as she thought back over the day.

"Thank you for such a lovely time," she said to Jacob when she turned back around.

"You're quite welcome," he replied.

She watched him a moment, this handsome man she'd somehow found to marry. "Do you ever wonder at how perfectly everything had to fall into place to make this moment happen?"

Jacob glanced at her, his face serious. "I do, sometimes. And then I thank God for making everything happen the way it did, even the painful moments."

Susannah knew he was speaking of losing his parents and the time he'd spent in jail. "I understand. All those years I wished for Uncle Bertram to change—they weren't terrible, not in the way you experienced—but I found myself wishing so often for something different. But if I'd gotten my wish—if God had answered my prayers the way I'd wanted him to then—I might not have come here. I would have never met you."

"That's how I've always seen it too," Jacob said, smiling again. He was quiet a moment as the horses led them alongside the railroad tracks, north to the ranch. "Back at the mercantile, you said you couldn't be happier than you already are. Was that the truth? Are you happy here?"

"It is and I am," she replied.

"It's nothing compared to what you're used to, though. You must not have lifted a finger at your home in Kentucky."

"Jacob." She laid a hand on his arm and he drew the horses to a halt. "I *am* happy. It took me some time to grow used to what was expected of me here, but once I understood and once I grew used to the work, I felt . . ." She paused, trying to figure out how to explain it. "You need me. Mrs. Abbott needs me. The men need me. Even those silly chickens need me. No one has ever needed me before. My mother, yes, but only for company and because she loves me. But no one has ever relied on me. My existence and how I filled my time back home weren't critical to anything whatsoever. Here, I feel . . . like I'm necessary."

A slow smile spread across Jacob's face. "You are necessary. And I

think . . .” He trailed off, his eyes searching hers.

Susannah’s breath caught in her throat. They were so close, her arm on his, and their shoulders nearly touching. He was but a few inches away. She swallowed, torn between wanting to look away and desperately hoping he wouldn’t end this moment.

No one had *ever* looked at her this way. Not with this sort of intention, and certainly not with the adoration she thought she saw in his eyes. In a fraction of a second, he leaned forward and caught her lips with his.

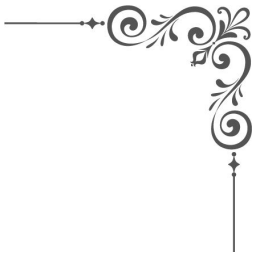
Susannah gasped at the sudden kiss and her eyes fluttered shut. She held onto his arm with all of her might as she slowly lost all sense of time and place. His mouth was warm against hers and she thought she might never be able to think properly again.

When he pulled away, she was lightheaded, as if she’d just woken from a dream.

But this was no dream. Jacob sat next to her, watching her with a concerned look, as if he feared he’d taken a liberty he shouldn’t have. She smiled at him, and he relaxed and urged the horses forward.

And as they drove home, his hand seeking out hers, she thought she’d been wrong in the store when she told him nothing could make her happier.

That had been a lie, because *this* had made her happier than she’d ever been before.



Chapter Twelve

AFTER THEY ARRIVED home, Susannah was arranging their purchases in the kitchen pantry when Jacob remembered the mail. He'd picked it up while on the way to retrieve the wagon and horses from the livery. There hadn't been much—an envelope for Furman, another for Ising, and then a small package for Susannah.

He set the envelopes for the ranch hands on the table and held out the package to Susannah.

"What is this?" She took it in her hands and turned it around, presumably looking for a return address. With nothing to find, she shrugged and pulled at the string. "Perhaps Mama found something I forgot to bring with me."

She pulled away the paper to reveal a carved wooden box. When she opened it, a letter awaited inside.

"Do you recognize it?" Jacob asked. It looked to be a jewelry box of sorts.

"I don't," Susannah said as she set the box down on the small table in the kitchen. "At least, I don't believe so." She opened the letter, glanced at it, and then looked up at Jacob. "It's from my mother."

"It must be a gift, then," he said, picking up the box to examine it. It was quite beautiful, with an intricate design of vines and flowers. When he lifted the lid, it showed a soft, velvety expanse in which to keep brooches and earbobs and whatever other adornments a lady might have. He set the box down and waited for Susannah to finish her letter.

"He's dead," she said after a moment, in a voice laced with disbelief. "Uncle Bertram."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Jacob replied because it seemed the right thing to say, even about a man who'd been so selfish as to deny his niece the one thing that would have made her happy.

Susannah frowned as she set the letter down. "I am sad to hear of his passing, although I must be honest and say I doubt either Mama or I will mourn particularly long. She's leaving for Chicago."

Jacob nodded. Susannah appeared troubled, though, despite her dislike for her uncle, and so Jacob stepped forward and opened his arms. She came to him immediately, and he folded her against him, closing his eyes as he breathed in the scent of her hair.

"Mama says that with Uncle now gone, the inheritance is finally mine—but that no one knows where the money is." Her voice was muffled against his chest.

"That's odd. He didn't keep it in a bank?"

"I suppose not." She looked up at him. "I oughtn't be surprised. Uncle Bertram didn't trust a soul other than himself." She sighed. "It doesn't much matter. I don't need it. I'll write to Mama and tell her to keep our home once she returns from visiting my aunt in Chicago. Perhaps she'll finally feel at home there again with him gone."

Jacob moved his hands to her shoulders. "You are one of a kind, Susannah. I hope you know that."

She searched his face. "What do you mean?"

"Only that most people, upon learning that an inheritance was theirs for the taking, would board the first train back."

She shrugged. "We have everything we need here. And besides, no one knows where it is. I wouldn't mind having it if it were to be found, of course, but I refuse to let it worry me. I'm perfectly happy with what I have right now." And with that, she rose up on her tiptoes and gave him a kiss.

Jacob held her to him, not wanting to let go, until she giggled, her lips still pressed against his.

"If we have any hope of feeding the hungry men who'll begin arriving shortly, I ought to get to making dinner. And I'm certain Mrs. Abbott would like to hear of all the happenings in town." She stepped away, a smile dancing on her lips.

"I suppose," Jacob said with a sigh. He took up the jewelry box. "Would you like to keep this in your room?"

Susannah tilted her head as she thought. "It is a strange gift. Mama bought me a jewelry box some years ago, and I brought it with me. I suppose it might look nice displayed in the parlor, perhaps in that little glass cabinet beside the clock?"

Jacob nodded. "I'll place it in there on my way upstairs."

He left Susannah humming a tune as she slipped her apron over her head. In the parlor, he opened the little cabinet he and Kate had made years ago and set the pretty box on one of the shelves. Closing the door, he stepped back to admire it. It was nice having something important to Susannah here in the parlor. It was as if she were truly becoming part of the Fletcher family.

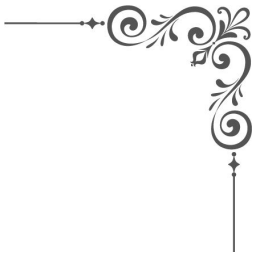
She and Kate had gotten along wonderfully earlier today, and before they'd left, Kate had pulled him aside and told him how happy she was for him.

He'd worried so much about Susannah finding life here at the ranch lacking compared to the life she was used to, but now, after today and after her disinterest in the missing inheritance money, he felt as if something had changed. His worry was gone, replaced with relief and . . . Happiness.

He grinned at the curio cabinet. Susannah wasn't the only one

happier than she'd ever been.

He was too.



Chapter Thirteen

BEFORE LONG, THE DAYS had passed until the end of August had arrived. And with that momentous date came a visit from the doctor in Crest Stone, who pronounced Mrs. Abbott ready to finally leave her bed and resume walking again.

Susannah had never seen the housekeeper look so overjoyed. Jacob helped her stand and take small walks around her room, and after a couple of days, Mrs. Abbott decided she was finally ready to descend the stairs.

To celebrate, Susannah planned a big meal of roast beef, sliced tomatoes with cheese, and corn pudding, with an apple pie for dessert. She worked most of the afternoon and slid the pie into the oven at just the right time before the men arrived for supper.

The mood in the house was jovial as everyone anticipated Mrs. Abbott's arrival. Susannah went upstairs with Jacob to help Mrs. Abbott, and when they appeared on the stairs, the men cheered.

Dear Mrs. Abbott's face went bright red, but she accepted each and every man's enthusiastic greeting with grace. They settled her at the head of the table where Jacob normally sat, and Susannah set a plate in front of her with a glass of freshly made lemonade.

"Thank you," Mrs. Abbott said. "It's such a relief being downstairs again. I feel as if I've missed the entire summer being tucked away in bed."

"Still feels like summer outside," Ising said, his face as serious as usual.

"But it won't be long before the aspens are turning and we're rounding up the herd," Furman said.

"I'll be glad to see that," Mrs. Abbott said with a smile. "Now please, go fetch your food so I don't feel as if you're all watching me eat."

The men didn't need asking twice, and Susannah soon found herself dishing up plates as quickly as she could move.

They enjoyed a merry dinner. Susannah kept a close eye on Mrs. Abbott. She'd eaten most of her food, but halfway through the meal, she set her fork down and leaned back in her chair. And not too long after that, Susannah noticed her eyes closing for longer periods of time.

"Are you tired?" she asked quietly, leaning over toward the housekeeper.

"A little. I'm . . ."

Susannah glanced at Jacob across from her, who was watching Mrs. Abbott in concern.

“Do you need to go back upstairs?” Jacob asked.

Mrs. Abbott nodded slowly.

Setting her napkin down, Susannah rose, and together they helped Mrs. Abbott from her chair. The men bid her good evening, and she gave them a little smile.

“Thank you,” she said when they’d settled her back into bed. “I was growing a bit faint. I’m sure I’ll be better in the morning.”

Susannah drew a chair up next to her as Jacob returned downstairs. “I’m glad to hear that. After all, the floors need scrubbing, and I can put you to work.”

Mrs. Abbott laughed at that, a happy sound that made Susannah smile. It would be good to have Mrs. Abbott downstairs more frequently. Susannah would be glad for the company.

They chatted a bit longer, about the work to be done and whether Mrs. Abbott would feel up to helping with the canning that needed to happen soon. Outside a rain began to fall, soft at first, and then more insistent.

And then the slight scent of something burning wafted up from the stairs. Susannah sniffed the air and then stood abruptly.

"Oh my goodness, my pie!" She raced out of Mrs. Abbott’s room and flew down the stairs, only to find Jacob and a couple of the ranch hands fanning the smoke that poured out of the little oven. On the small table nearby sat a blackened pie.

Susannah drew her hands to her face. “I was so caught up in talking with Mrs. Abbott that I forgot all about the pie.”

Mr. Furman looked longingly at the charred dessert. “I imagine it was going to taste mighty good, too.”

“I’m so sorry,” Susannah said. She hated to disappoint the men. They all worked so hard, and the pie would have been a nice treat for them.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Fletcher,” one of the younger men said from where he stood in the doorway. “That supper was so good I doubt I could eat another bite anyhow.”

Jacob kicked the door to the oven shut with the toe of his boot. “It’s mostly aired out now. If we open the doors, that’ll help get the smoke out of the house.”

Mr. Ising went to the front door while Susannah went to the door that led out back from the kitchen. She opened it wide, thankful the covered porch kept the rain from coming into the house.

As she breathed in the fresh air, her vision caught something fluttering in the growing darkness. It looked like . . .

She slapped her hand over her mouth a second time. The laundry!

Without a word to Jacob, she sprinted outside. Rain splattered over her hair and her clothing as she took shirts and trousers and skirts from the rope that stretched between two sturdy posts.

"Susannah!" Jacob called from the porch. "What are you doing out there?"

"The laundry!" she shouted through the falling rain.

The soaking clothing was heavy, weighing down her arm as she continued stacking it. In a moment, Jacob was beside her, taking the load.

"You ought to have just left this out here. It would've dried tomorrow," he said.

He had a point, but it was too late now. Susannah couldn't believe she'd forgotten about it. Grabbing the last shirt from the line, she sprinted after Jacob.

"I can lay it out on the porch," she said, thankful she'd at least remembered to sweep back here earlier in the day.

Jacob said nothing in return, but began laying trousers and skirts out on the porch floor.

Susannah pressed a dripping tendril of hair back from her face and got to work. The temperature had dropped with the onset of the rain, and by the time she'd laid out the last article of clothing, she was shivering.

"You're freezing. Come inside and get warm." Jacob held out a hand.

But Susannah looked back over the clothing. "If I wring them out, that might help them to dry faster."

"Nonsense. They'll dry when they dry. You need to get inside."

When she didn't move, he came up behind her, put his hands on her shoulders, and steered her toward the door.

Most of the men had returned to the bunkhouse. Only a couple remained, and they scattered when Jacob gestured toward the front door. He propelled Susannah into a chair in the parlor, away from the smoky kitchen. The fire in here was crackling merrily, but Susannah only barely noticed. Her teeth began to chatter.

Jacob fetched a woolen blanket and wrapped it around her. "I'll light the fire in your room. Once that's going, you can change into dry clothing."

Susannah nodded, and Jacob headed to the stairs. He stopped and looked back at her, almost as if he were afraid to leave her. Susannah forced herself to smile at him, and he disappeared up the stairs.

But as soon as he was gone, the smile fell away. She thought she'd had everything under control here, that she was learning to be a rancher's wife.

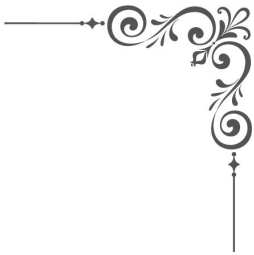
But today had been nothing but a mess. She hadn't helped Jacob at

all today; instead, she'd caused him even more work.

Susannah sighed as the chills subsided in the warmth of the blaze before her. Off to the right, the curio cabinet sat, filled with little treasures and pretty things Kate and Jacob's mother had likely collected. But there, right in the middle, was the jewelry box Mama had sent her.

It was a thoughtful gift, albeit an odd one considering how proud Mama had been of that first jewelry box she'd purchased four years ago. But right now, all it did was serve to remind Susannah of her life before the Silver Creek Ranch.

Perhaps she never would be anything but Susannah Hughes, the girl who could do nothing more useful than embroider and paint a pretty picture. A burden to anyone she loved.



Chapter Fourteen

JACOB AWOKE EARLY THE next morning, before the sun had even begun to touch the sky. He paused outside Susannah's room, but it was quiet beyond her door. He silently made his way downstairs and to the kitchen. Setting his lamp on the table, he lit the stove, went outside for water, and began to make coffee.

The scent of smoke still lingered in the kitchen, despite the open windows. It stirred something that sat uneasily inside Jacob. It wasn't the burnt pie or the soaked laundry.

It was Susannah herself.

He wanted to believe her when she'd said she was happier here than she'd been back in Kentucky, but if he was being honest with himself, it was hard to imagine that to be the truth. Even with an uncle who'd driven off all her suitors, didn't she much prefer having servants tend to her every need?

She'd said she felt needed here, and those words had made his heart soar. But after seeing her so upset last night, he wondered if she wasn't thinking she could more easily fulfill that same desire through some sort of charity work while someone else cooked her dinner and ironed her clothing. Especially now that the uncle she disliked so much was dead. And especially now that she had an inheritance waiting for her—wherever her uncle had kept it.

Here, in the dark of the pre-morning, Jacob wondered if today would be the day Susannah decided to leave.

A chill ran through him as he imagined waking up each day and not seeing her face. The house would feel so empty without her here. *He* would feel empty without Susannah. But thinking about persuading her to stay felt selfish. If she was unhappy, it would be wrong.

But how could he live without her?

Just the thought of annulling their marriage so she could marry some well-to-do dandy in Kentucky made a knot of anger and despair rise inside his throat.

"Jacob?" Susannah's soft voice sounded from behind him.

Jacob turned around from where he'd been standing with his hands pressed against the table. She greeted him in the shadowy light with a soft smile, all traces of the frustration she'd experienced the night before gone from her face.

He didn't hesitate. It might have been selfish, but in that moment he didn't care. He placed a hand on each side of her face and kissed

her as if he hadn't seen her in ages.

"Well, good morning," she said, still smiling when he broke away.

"It is indeed a good morning," he said. He held her a moment longer before forcing himself to step away. "I started coffee."

Susannah nodded as she slipped her apron over her head.

It was time to start the day, and Jacob pressed every fear he'd awoken with that morning away, hoping they might be gone forever.

JACOB CLOSED THE CORRAL gate as a few drops of rain began to fall from the sky. It had been overcast all day, the clouds hanging heavy with rain, but it had remained dry until now. He hurried up to the house, eager to see Susannah.

As he approached, he spotted a figure on the front porch. That was odd. Susannah was usually in the kitchen at this time of day, finishing up supper. But that was most definitely her on the porch.

He walked more quickly, and when he reached the porch steps, he heard her sniffling.

"Susannah?" he called as he climbed the steps. What could have happened to make her so upset? The fears he'd had in the dark of the morning rose again, and he squashed them down.

She looked up then, her face tear-stained and . . . was that soot that darkened her skin? Her apron was stained as well.

He knelt in front of her, taking her hands. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, tendrils of her dark hair wisping back and forth. "It . . . I . . ." She gulped a sob and Jacob squeezed her hands.

"Take your time," he said, lifting a hand to brush the hair from her face. Soot dirtied his fingers as they grazed her cheek.

Finally, she wiped the back of one hand across her eyes. "It was an accident. I must have dropped some lard onto the stove while I was cooking. I didn't notice it, and I left the pot of stew on to cook while I went outside to gather the laundry." She gave a wry smile. "At least I remembered the laundry this time."

Jacob smiled back, glad to see a bit of humor in her tale.

"But it caught fire—the stove, I mean, or the lard that spilled, or . . . I . . . I'm not sure exactly. But there was a fire when I returned to the kitchen. And I panicked, Jacob. All I could think was that it might catch onto the wall or the floor, and Mrs. Abbott is upstairs and—and —" She make a sound somewhere between a choke and a sob.

Jacob rose and collected her against him. He ran a hand over her hair as she cried. "It's all right. The house is still standing. I presume all is well with Mrs. Abbott?"

She nodded against his chest. "I put it out with the extra pan. But

the stew is ruined, and I nearly burned down the house." She looked up at him, her eyes rimmed in red.

"But you didn't. That is what's important. You acted quickly and now all is well." He smoothed the hair back from her face and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

But she didn't smile back this time. Instead, she pulled away. "I don't know why you're so patient with me. I'm hopeless. All I'm good at are things that mean nothing. Save for growing vegetables. But what use is that when I can't cook them?" She looked away. "I'll understand if you've had enough and wish to have a wife who can accomplish the simplest of tasks without catastrophe."

"Susannah." His voice was low, not betraying the wild despair that raced through the corners of his mind. "I don't care how many mistakes you've made. You're learning. Do you like it here?"

She wouldn't look at him. "It doesn't matter. You deserve better than me."

I can't lose you, his mind screamed. "I deserve *you*. You're—" His voice broke and he paused, trying to gather the emotions under control again. "You're everything to me."

She shook her head, her eyes finding him again. "But I'm not. I'm useless. If you'd like an annulment, I won't fight it, Jacob. I'll return to Louisville and you'll never need think of me again."

"Susannah."

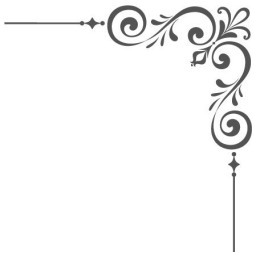
She stood, brushing past him as she entered the door. Jacob followed her.

"Susannah!"

But she was already up the stairs, and a half-second later, the door to her room closed. She'd shut herself away—from him, from the ranch, from everything she'd told him he wanted.

Jacob closed his hands into fists. He wanted to run one through the wall, but that frustration was better used toward convincing Susannah to stay.

He'd show her how much she meant, not just to him, but to everyone here at the Silver Creek. Because if she left, he'd never be the same again.



Chapter Fifteen

SUSANNAH HAD NEVER strayed this far from the house, at least not alone. But the more she walked, the more she was able to think through all the tangled emotions and events of the past few weeks.

What had she been thinking, she mused as she stepped through a miniature field of white wildflowers, still clinging to life as the summer was slowly turning into fall. That she could simply turn herself from a socialite to a frontier woman in the blink of an eye? She, who hadn't once in her life done so much as stir a pot of soup or touched a broom?

Susannah could have laughed at the absurdity of it, but her heart was in pieces at the thought that she might never learn. She paused to catch her breath. Women in her position here had spent their entire lives preparing to keep a house and cooking for untold numbers of men. What had made her think she could stumble in and somehow learn all of it in mere weeks? She'd be spending her life trying to catch up to what they knew.

Jacob deserved better.

The truth of that thought had burrowed its way under her skin as she'd slept last night. Those poor men had eaten cheese sandwiches and sliced carrots last night, because that was all she'd been able to pull together when she finally emerged from her room. She'd served them, brought a plate to Mrs. Abbott, and then promptly locked herself away again. She hadn't spoken another word to Jacob.

This morning she'd risen early, thrown together another meal that was sorely lacking, and disappeared out the door before Jacob had even set foot downstairs. And since then, she'd walked. Up and down the little hills around the house, discreetly avoiding the ranch hands when she spotted them.

But now she'd come far enough that even the ranch hands weren't to be seen. She might very well become lost out there, but even that was impossible. The two mountain ranges stood on either side of her, beacons of east and west, with the railroad tracks running north and south. She knew exactly where the house was in relation to those mountains and the railroad tracks.

Jacob deserved better. The thought wouldn't leave, no matter how hard she'd tried to think around it. It seemed he was trying to convince her otherwise when he'd found her on the front porch yesterday evening, but nothing he said could make her forget about everything she'd messed up so badly. He had a ranch to run, and

ultimately that was the most important thing.

Her feelings toward him didn't matter one bit. If she stayed as it seemed he wanted her to, she'd only drive him toward ruin. A man couldn't run a ranch without help he could trust. He did better without her. Besides, Mrs. Abbott was getting better each day, and it wouldn't be long before she was in the kitchen again.

It would be like Susannah had never been here.

But even as that thought fluttered through her mind, she knew *she* would never forget.

The prospect of returning to Louisville didn't excite her at all. Even with Uncle Bertram gone, even the thought of seeing Mama again . . . none of it compared to the time she'd spent here with Jacob.

With an annulment, she could return home and marry whomever she wished. Perhaps one of her old beaux who hadn't yet married would come calling again.

But Susannah's stomach turned at the thought. None of them were Jacob.

She didn't know what that meant, but she didn't dare think on it for too long else she'd change her mind altogether. She didn't belong here, and the sooner she left, the better it would be for everyone.

A small hill rose before her with a grove of pines and aspens clinging to its side. It looked as good a place as any to sit for a moment and make plans. If she was going to leave, she needed to figure out how—and what to do if she couldn't convince Jacob that it was for the best.

Letting her fingers graze the trunk of one of the more spindly aspens, Susannah slipped into the trees. It was slightly cooler here, out of the sun, although the days had been growing less hot as September had come on. She closed her eyes a moment, letting the sound of the birds and the leaves rustling in the breeze to fill her mind.

She would miss moments like these. They were hard to come by in the city, with the constant rattling of carriages and the shouts of people on the street. And the air never smelled this sweet. She drew in a deep breath, and an image of herself and Jacob immediately filled her mind. The two of them, sitting together on the steps of the front porch, watching the sun go down over the peaks of the Sange de Cristo Mountains, as oranges and yellows and pinks stretched across the sky and turned the grasses of the ranch gold.

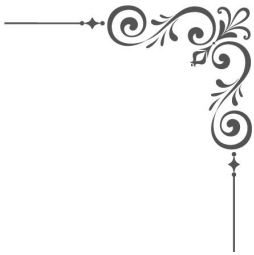
It was a magical, warm thought, and Susannah smiled, treasuring it for just a moment before she pushed it away in favor of what she knew needed to happen.

And when she opened her eyes, it was to see her uncle's butler, Vernon, standing before her.

She smiled for just a second, wondering at the oddity of his

appearance and thinking she must have fallen into a dream, when he brandished a pistol.

A pistol aimed directly at her.



Chapter Sixteen

JACOB RETURNED TO THE ranch at noon, unable to concentrate on work with Susannah weighing on his mind. He arrived to a surprise—Mrs. Abbott was sitting on the front porch, a blanket pulled over her lap.

He gave her a broad smile as he bounded up the steps. “It’s so good to see you sitting out here. Did Susannah help you downstairs?”

Mrs. Abbott furrowed her brow. “I came down alone. Now don’t chastise me—I feel just fine and I stepped slowly. I called for Susannah, but she didn’t answer. I haven’t seen her at all. Did you put her to work in the barn?”

Jacob glanced through the open door, as if he might suddenly spot her in the hallway. “No, I didn’t. So far as I know, she should be here.”

“Perhaps she went for a stroll, then.” Mrs. Abbott rearranged her blanket.

Jacob let out a frustrated sigh. “I’d hoped to speak with her.”

“Are there troubles between you?” Mrs. Abbott asked with an arched eyebrow. “I’d wondered. Susannah seemed withdrawn when she brought my supper up last night.”

Jacob dropped into a chair beside Mrs. Abbott. Perhaps he’d tell her a little of what had happened. She often had good advice to share. “I don’t believe so. But she’s so hard on herself.” He paused a moment. “And that might be my fault. I was impatient with her when she first arrived, not understanding her background. But I thought we’d come to an understanding, and I told her again and again how well she was doing. And she was. But between the pie and the laundry and the fire on the stove yesterday . . . She doubts herself. And it seems nothing I say can make her think otherwise.” He stopped himself before he launched into the greatest fear that sat upon his heart.

Mrs. Abbott was silent for a bit. When she spoke, it was to say, “There’s something else, isn’t there? I could hear it in your voice.”

Jacob rubbed a hand across his face. Trust Mrs. Abbott to know when he wasn’t speaking the entire truth. She was the one who saw through all his falsehoods as a boy, after all, even when his mother couldn’t.

He sat up straight and turned to face the woman who’d been a mother to him since his own had passed. “Am I being selfish, wanting her to remain here? If I let her go, she could return to the city, find her inheritance, and marry a man who could provide the kind of life

she's used to."

It hurt to put the fear into words. It would hurt even more if Mrs. Abbott agreed that yes, he was looking out only for his own interest.

But he wouldn't be the kind of man who kept a wife against her will. If she would be happier elsewhere, he'd let her go. Even if it might break him.

"It isn't selfish," Mrs. Abbott said. "It's love."

Jacob blinked at her. Could it be? And then it was so obvious, he couldn't believe he hadn't realized it before.

He'd fallen in love with Susannah.

Jacob sat back, letting the idea sit for a moment. "But even if I have, how does that make it all right to convince her to stay here when she wants to leave?"

"I'm not sure that's the question you need to be asking yourself," Mrs. Abbott said gently.

Jacob blew out an irritated breath. "Then what *should* I be asking? Because the fact remains that I'd like her to stay, and I'm fairly certain she's made up her mind to leave."

"But has she? Have you told her how you feel?"

He glanced at Mrs. Abbott. "No," he confessed. "I haven't. At least not in so many words."

"Then my suggestion would be to do just that, the moment she returns."

Jacob sighed, looking out over his land to the mountains beyond. "How is it that you know all there is to know?"

Mrs. Abbott laughed. "Only God knows all. I simply watch and listen. And you forget that I have several more years on you. At least you aren't as hard-headed as your sister was when Mr. McFarland came day after day. Any fool could see he was taken with her, but she refused to believe it."

Jacob grinned. When he'd returned home after that year away, it had been Michael's gun that had met him on this very porch. The man had returned to guard the ranch from cattle rustlers even after Kate had summarily dismissed him.

He stood then and thanked Mrs. Abbott. After helping her back up to her room, he returned to his work. He'd speak to Susannah that evening, after supper. Surely her walk would do her good.

Jacob whistled as he set off on Brewster across the pasture, trying to determine exactly how he would tell Susannah that he loved her. He pondered on the thought all day, until time came to return to the house. After washing up, he went inside, hoping he'd smell something delicious.

But there were no scents of food to be had in the house. It was quiet, and the fireplaces remained unlit despite the cool air gathering

outside.

"Susannah?" he called as he crossed from the parlor to the kitchen.

But that room was empty too. Not a pan nor a pot was to be seen. The stove was cold. And it looked as if no one had touched the kitchen since early that morning.

Had she worn herself out after her walk? Jacob checked behind the house, and seeing nothing, he made his way upstairs. He knocked quietly on Susannah's door. When no answer came, he knocked again.

Silence.

Pressing the door open just slightly, he peeked inside. Her trunks sat off by the wall, empty now of their belongings. The bed was neatly made. A nightdress hung from a peg on the wall, a book sat on the night table, and the pretty mirror and brush set he'd purchased for her laid upon the table with the pitcher and washbasin.

Crossing the distance to Mrs. Abbott's room, he knocked on her door.

"Yes?" came her pleasant voice.

"Mrs. Abbott, have you seen or heard Susannah?"

She shook her head. "Not at all. I presumed she was busy downstairs."

Not wanting to worry her, Jacob nodded. "Yes, perhaps that was it. I'll look out back in the garden."

Mrs. Abbott smiled at him, and a blooming worry began to unfurl deep down inside Jacob.

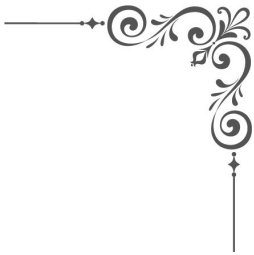
Had she already left? That was the first thought he had as he made his way back downstairs. No, she couldn't have, not without at least some of the items she'd arrived with. And he hadn't noticed any of the horses missing from the barn or corral. Of course, he hadn't truly been looking either.

He paced the hallway between the stairs and the kitchen. Had she gotten lost while out on her walk? It was possible, he supposed, though unlikely. Getting turned around in this valley with the mountains and the railroad tracks running north and south was nearly impossible.

Perhaps she'd been hurt. Fear gripped his insides as he imagined her sprawled upon the ground with a broken ankle or worse. He ripped off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. Where should he look first? Which way would she have most likely gone? He'd have to get the men to help search. Perhaps if they all went different directions, they'd stumble upon her.

Mind made up, he retraced his steps toward the parlor, but paused when something—or the lack of something—caught his eye.

The jewelry box, the one Susannah's mother had sent, was missing.



Chapter Seventeen

THE BOX SLIPPED AGAIN from Vernon's grasp, landing in the sandy mud as he cursed aloud.

Susannah's eyes widened. She'd never imagined mild-mannered, quiet Vernon to be capable of such speech. Then again, she's also never contemplated he'd hold her at gunpoint, tie her hands together, and demand to know where she'd hidden her inheritance money.

After she'd found her voice again upon meeting him and his pistol in the trees at the hillside, she'd asked what he was doing here.

"I've come for what's owed to me," he'd said, keeping that gun perfectly level.

"I don't understand." Susannah's throat had gone dry. What had she ever done to Vernon to deserve this sort of treatment? "If you need help, I'm happy to give it to you. You certainly don't need a weapon. You're like family to me, Vernon."

He laughed, harsh and unamused. "I was a servant, that's all. I put in years of work for your uncle, only to have him die without leaving me a penny. I know you have the money. I saw your mother leave with a sack one afternoon, and the very next day, she dismissed all of us. 'Here's a reference,' she said. As if all I ever wanted was to continue working in service for the rest of my life."

Susannah blinked at him. None of this made sense. Of course Mama would dismiss the servants after Uncle's death. They all knew of her plans to stay with her sister. She'd need to close up the house in Louisville to do that. And why did he think she'd sent Susannah money? No one knew where the inheritance was.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," she said in the most restrained voice possible. "But all Mama has sent me since my arrival here is a letter and a jewelry box. I've received no funds. She said the money was missing. Now, if you'll—"

"A jewelry box?" Vernon's eyebrows shot up. "What did it look like?"

Why did he care? "It's a pretty wooden box, that's all. I suppose she thought I needed a new one for my new life here. Now, please, would you put away that pistol?" The weapon was making Susannah nervous, and she didn't understand why Vernon thought he needed it.

But instead of lowering the gun, he narrowed his eyes at her, giving him an even more pronounced hawk-like look. It had intimidated Susannah as a child, that piercing gaze from a man so tall and thin, but she refused to be cowed now. Not after all she'd survived

here in Colorado.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

"I don't see how that is any business of yours," Susannah said in as cool a voice as she could muster, which wasn't particularly easy given the pounding of her heart.

He waved the pistol a bit. "I want that box."

"Well," she said, swallowing. "It isn't something I bring along on walks across the valley. It's at home, of course."

And with that, he'd directed her to mount the horse he had waiting behind a few trees. For a moment, Susannah considered running, but she didn't know how sure of a shot Vernon was. And so, using a fallen tree as a stool, she climbed upon the horse. The second she was up there, sitting uncomfortably astride in her skirts, he bound her hands together and then climbed up behind her.

The ride was slow and terrifying. She prayed that one of the ranch hands would spot them, but Vernon was surprisingly adept at steering clear of them.

Perhaps if she knew more about his plans, Susannah could figure a way out of the situation. "How did you know I'd be walking this way?" she finally asked after gathering up the courage.

"I didn't," he said shortly.

She tried to grip the saddle horn with her sweaty palms. She couldn't decide whether it was a curse or a blessing that she'd been so distracted she'd forgotten gloves that morning. "Then what were you doing in those trees? Have you been camping there?" Imagining the haughty butler sleeping on the ground was almost unbelievable.

He grunted in response, which Susannah took to mean she'd found the truth. "But why there? You can't see the ranch." Of course, the moment the words were out of her mouth, she knew that was the reason. He couldn't see the ranch, but no one on the ranch could see him either. "Were you planning to rob us in the dead of night?"

He didn't answer, and Susannah ground her teeth together. That must have been it, though. How else did he plan to get his hands on the money he thought she had? He certainly couldn't have expected her to come wandering up to his campsite the way she had.

Judging from where the sun sat in the sky, it was late afternoon when they approached the house. Susannah prayed the men would be just outside. That Jacob might be working on a fence or that Mr. Bardsley would be brushing down a horse.

But it wasn't to be. No one was in sight.

After circling the house to ensure just that, Vernon approached the back porch. He loosely tied his horse to the porch railing and paused a moment as if deciding what to do next.

If she could go inside, she could get the shotgun Jacob kept in the

parlor. She didn't know the first thing about using it, and her hands were tied, but perhaps if she grabbed a knife in the kitchen and sliced open the rope, she could grab the shotgun and somehow convince Vernon she knew how to fire it.

But instead of letting her down, he reached up and coiled another length of rope from her hands to the porch railing. Never in a hundred years would she have pictured Vernon tying her to a porch railing in order to steal from her.

"Where is the jewelry box?" he asked as he tied off the knot.

Susannah stared at the rope. There was nothing she could do here. She'd have to both untie her hands and the rope securing the horse to the railing. By the time she accomplished that, he'd be out of the house with the jewelry box.

Unless she told him it was somewhere else. That might buy her time—

"The box," he said again. "Where is it?"

She closed her eyes. If she lied, he'd search the entire house. That might give her time to get away, provided she could undo the ropes, but what about Mrs. Abbott? If Vernon became angry, he might . . . She couldn't even think it.

"It's in the curio cabinet in the parlor. At the front of the house."

He hurried up the steps, faster than Susannah had ever seen him move back at home. There, he was the very picture of stateliness and grace.

He emerged a few minutes later, a satisfied smile upon his face and the box tucked under his arm.

And now she found herself sitting on an uncomfortable rock by the creek, her hands still tied, as Vernon fumbled to open every drawer of the jewelry box.

"Where is it?" he muttered, turning it over in his hands.

Susannah pressed her lips together. She'd already pulled open each little drawer when she received the jewelry box to admire it, but Vernon seemed to think she'd missed something. And so he opened them again and again.

He threw the box to the ground, and Susannah jumped. "You've already found the money and taken it out," he said, pointing a finger at her.

Susannah shook her head. "I told you. There was nothing in the jewelry box except a letter. Besides, if I had the money, I would have already told you. I would have offered you at least some of it to put an end to all of this." She almost wished she did have the money. She'd gladly give it to Vernon. There was no need for it on the ranch—they had everything they needed.

Her heart constricted. *If* she stayed. But even if she left, she could

stay with Mama at Aunt Lillian's in Chicago. The inheritance wasn't necessary whatsoever.

"Hmm." Vernon watched her, seemingly considering her words. He took up the box again and turned it onto its side. Then, squinting at the box, he held it closer to his face and ran a finger over part of it. "It's hidden inside," he said triumphantly.

"Inside?" Susannah repeated. "In a hidden compartment?" Her mind spun. Had Mama done just that? If so, then why?

She knew Vernon wanted the money.

Susannah's heart thumped as she realized that must be what had happened. Uncle Bertram actually told Mama where it was hidden, but upon discovering Vernon's desire to have it for himself, Mama must have moved it into a hidden compartment in the jewelry box. And then sent it clear across the country to Susannah with a letter stating that the money had gone missing.

But how did she think Susannah would ever find it? Did she mean to tell her one day, once the threat of Vernon had passed?

Susannah didn't know. Vernon had pulled a knife from his belongings and was going to work prying the box apart.

Susannah shifted on the rock where she sat as she watched him. If the money was inside, what would happen then? He'd have what he came for. But what of her, now that she knew he'd come here and taken it? She swallowed hard and stretched her hands against the ropes. "What happens if it is hidden inside?" she forced herself to ask.

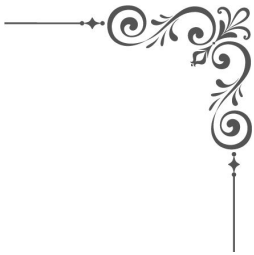
He didn't bother looking up at her as he worked. "I'll be a very rich man."

"And I'll return to the ranch," she said hesitantly, hoping against hope that he'd simply nod and agree.

But instead he paused, his cold gray eyes catching hers. "I suppose I'll figure that out once we come to it." Pausing only a second more, he went back to work on the jewelry box.

Susannah's stomach turned. He had no intention of allowing her to return to the ranch—or anywhere. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep the panic from overcoming her. She had to figure a way out of here, whether by words or by actions. Possibilities turned and crashed in her mind as Vernon pulled at the wooden panels, trying to lever them apart with the knife.

In a split second, the box sprang apart into two pieces, and bills drifted into the air and down onto the ground.



Chapter Eighteen

JACOB'S EYES TRACED the ground as he and Ising rode toward the creek. He'd sent the men off in pairs in all directions. He didn't know if Susannah was simply hurt and unable to move, or if something more sinister had happened. All he knew was that he needed to find her. The need to see her again was so strong it seemed to spur his every movement, down the breath he drew in and forced out.

"These tracks are useless," he said to Ising. "It's impossible to tell if they came from one of us or someone else."

Ising scanned the valley as they rode. "We're nearly to the creek."

Jacob could only hope that Silver Creek yielded some answers. Not knowing where Susannah was, or if she was hurt, was worse than fearing she might leave him. It might destroy him, but he could live with the latter.

They moved the horses through the trees that lined the creek. Twigs and brush crunched underfoot, but all else was silent until—

Jacob drew up his horse the second he heard the scream. He turned to Ising, who pointed off to the north, down the creek.

He wanted nothing more than to race to the source of that scream and fight off any wild animal or man who had caused it, but sense told him it was better to go in quietly, on foot.

They left the horses tied to trees. Jacob pulled his revolver from his holster as they crept through the cottonwoods and stands of aspen until close enough to the edge that they could see the creek as they walked. And there, not too far down, he caught a glimpse of something moving—*someone* moving.

He held out a hand, and Ising stopped too. Just past the trees in front of them, the person walked awkwardly down to the creek, seemingly dragging something along in front of him.

But it wasn't a heavy item he was dragging—it was a person.

Jacob squinted. It was a woman, her lilac skirts flying out about her as the man forced her down toward the creek.

"Susannah," he whispered. He took a step forward only to have Ising grab hold of his sleeve.

"Wait," was all Ising said, but Jacob knew he was right. If he barreled into the scene now, Susannah might end up hurt—or worse.

He redoubled his grip on the revolver as he gritted his teeth and watched the man struggle to get Susannah down to the creek. What was he planning? Jacob could guess, and none of his ideas ended with Susannah being unhurt.

Just as he didn't think he could stand waiting a moment longer, Susannah kicked out. Her leg landed against the back of the man's knees and he stumbled, losing his balance and landing in a kneeling position on the creek bank. He still held her arm, even as she struggled to get away.

"Now," Jacob whispered, and without looking to see if Ising heard him, he bolted from the trees and ran toward the man kneeling on the ground.

Susannah's eyes grew wide as she spotted him, but she said nothing, instead turning her attention to trying to pull her arm from the man's grip.

Holstering his revolver, Jacob ran straight into the man from behind, forcing him face forward into the edge of the creek. The man lost hold of Susannah's arm, and she scurried away. He rolled, trying to throw Jacob off.

Jacob let him go a little, just enough for the man to raise his head, sputtering from the creek water. Then Jacob reached back and landed a fist directly into the fellow's jaw. He fell backward. Jacob rose, but the man's hand lashed out and grabbed hold of his sleeve, dragging him back down.

For his slight build, the fellow was strong. He yanked, but Jacob couldn't pull his arm away from the man's grip. Rising slightly from where he lay in the creek, his assailant drew a pistol and pointed it directly at Jacob.

Jacob stretched his left arm across his body, trying to reach for his own gun, but the holster was pressed into the ground under his body. If he could shift just a little, he'd be able to reach it. But could he do it fast enough?

The man gave him an evil grin. "You won't have my money."

"What money?" Jacob ground out as he tried to move just enough to reach his weapon.

"I suppose he means this money?" Ising said from somewhere off toward the trees.

The man's attention moved from Jacob to Ising, turning away. Jacob followed his gaze to see Susannah and Ising standing near a large rock. Ising held up what looked like part of Susannah's jewelry box. Bills floated to the ground from the box.

The momentary distraction was just what Jacob needed. He turned and snatched his pistol from its holster. He pressed it against the man's chest.

The man looked down at Jacob's gun and then back at where Ising had handed the box to Susannah and was aiming his own pistol at the man.

"Vernon, set it down. It's over. Please." Susannah clutched the

broken half of the jewelry box to herself, her hands still bound together.

The man—Vernon, Jacob supposed—looked back to Jacob, and then he did just as Susannah had asked. He set his weapon down and then sat back on the creek bank.

Jacob rose slowly and scooped up Vernon's pistol. Ising found a length of rope on Vernon's horse and tied the man's hands together as Jacob freed Susannah. She ran a hand over each of her wrists before looking up at him.

"I'm sorry," she said at the exact same moment he also said, "I'm sorry." They each gave an uneasy laugh as Ising led Vernon to his horse.

"He was our butler," Susannah said, her gaze following Vernon and Ising.

Jacob nodded, then looked at the money strewn across the ground. "And I take it this is your inheritance?"

"That's what Vernon said. Apparently Mama found it and hid it in the jewelry box. Presumably to keep it safe from him." Susannah looked back up at Vernon, who sat on his horse, his eyes cast down.

Jacob bent down and helped Susannah scoop up the money. They were large bills, larger than Jacob had ever seen in his life. Susannah tucked them into half the jewelry box, and then, together with Ising and the would-be-robber, they made their way toward Jacob and Ising's horses.

Jacob helped Susannah on to his own horse, and he climbed behind the saddle. As he nudged the horse forward, through the trees and out into the valley, she leaned back into his chest. Jacob didn't know if it was because she wanted to be close to him or because she was tired, but he appreciated it nonetheless.

By the time they arrived home, the sun had set. A few of the men had already arrived back from searching, and more came soon after they dismounted. Each of the ranch hands embraced Susannah, telling her how happy they were she was found safe. Jacob watched for a moment, appreciating the way she took the time to speak with each of them, despite the ordeal she'd been through.

"What do you want to do with him?" Ising gestured at Vernon.

"It's too late to ride him into town," Jacob replied as he unsaddled his horse. "Put him in the barn, I suppose. We can take turns keeping watch."

Ising nodded and led the man and his horse to the barn. Jacob instructed the men to find what food they could in the kitchen. Several volunteered to keep watch over Vernon.

One by one, they made their way from the kitchen to the bunkhouse, a couple veering off toward the barn for the first watch.

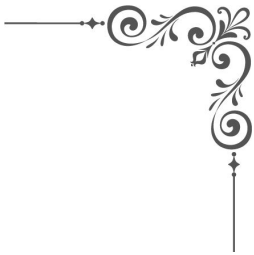
Jacob stood inside the front door and watched them go as Susannah brought Mrs. Abbott a late supper upstairs.

One of the stairs creaked behind him, and he turned. There she was, in mussed skirts and hair that had mostly come loose from its pins, but looking like an angel all the same.

Jacob stepped back and cleared his throat. “Would you come sit outside with me?”

She nodded, chewing on her lip, and then stepped past him. Jacob took a deep breath and followed her out, ready to tell her the truth of his feelings.

And to find out how she felt in return.



Chapter Nineteen

SUSANNAH WALKED THE length of the porch, thinking she might sit, but then changing her mind and choosing to stand instead. Jacob drew up next to her, his hands in his trousers pockets. He was so handsome, this man she'd married. And if she hadn't realized the depths of her feelings for him while Vernon was dragging her down to the creek to drown her, she certainly would have when he arrived like a knight in armor, prepared to do whatever it took to save her life.

He wasn't just handsome—he was smart, kind, and braver than she ever could have imagined.

"How is Mrs. Abbott?" Jacob asked.

"She is well. She's relieved we're all home again and safe." Susannah hated worrying the housekeeper.

They were quiet a moment. Stars twinkled in the sky off in the distance, and somewhere out there, beyond the Silver Creek's land, beyond the creek itself, lay the mountains, reaching ever for the sky. Susannah sighed as a chill breeze ruffled her hair and her skirts. But she wasn't cold. Not now, not with Jacob nearby and so many thoughts chasing themselves through her head.

"Susannah," Jacob said in a low, serious voice.

She looked up to find him watching her. Instinct told her to reach for his hand, but too much had happened between them to make that an option right now, as much as she wished for it to happen.

"Yes?" She had so much to say to him, and yet she held back.

"When I thought I'd lost you, I was angry at myself. And when I saw you by the creek, with that man dragging you into the water, I knew I'd do anything to protect you. I'd never been so afraid in my life, not even when I was shot, or thought for certain I was going to prison for crimes I'd never committed."

Susannah swallowed. "I wish I'd never gone on that walk. I thought only to clear my head and then to return, but, well . . ."

"That wasn't your fault. How could you have known he'd be out there waiting for you? Or that your mother hid money in a jewelry box?"

"I don't care about the inheritance." It was the truth when she'd said the same to Vernon, and it held true now. She had everything she wanted right here at the Silver Creek Ranch.

"Are you certain? It's yours."

Susannah paused, and then nodded. "I'll find some worthy cause for it. My father worked hard for that money, and it's only fitting that

it go to help someone in need."

Jacob watched her, his face softening. "All right." He looked down, and then back up to her. "I . . . Well, there's no easy way to say this. But Mrs. Abbott insisted I confess to you, and she's right. I should have told you before, as soon as I realized it."

"Tell me what?" Despite the gravity of the moment, Susannah's lips lifted slightly at the corners at Jacob's discomfort. She knew what she hoped he'd say, and yet she feared getting her hopes up only to be disappointed.

He closed his eyes a moment before opening them again, as if he were trying to gather courage. "I love you. I don't know when precisely it happened, but somewhere between the bland soup and Mrs. Abbott's birthday and sitting by the creek, I fell in love with you. I ought to have told you sooner."

Susannah drew a hand to her lips as a smile grew. He loved her. Despite everything she'd done wrong, no matter how much she'd failed at being a cook and a housekeeper, he *loved* her.

"But I won't be selfish. If you wish to leave, you may. I won't keep you here if it . . . if *I* . . . make you unhappy." He watched her carefully, as if he feared her response.

"Oh, Jacob." Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes, but Susannah refused to cry now. Not when everything she wanted was finally happening. She couldn't find the words, not just yet. And so instead, she threw her arms around him and pressed her face against his.

He was still for a second, and then his arms wound around her, pulling her closer to him. She could feel his heart beat against hers, and she breathed deeply.

"I don't want to leave," she whispered in his ear. "I want to stay here, with you, forever. I love you, too, Jacob."

His lips found hers then, and he kissed her more thoroughly than he ever had before pulling away just a few inches.

"Are you certain?" he asked, out of breath. "I can't give you the life here that you had before."

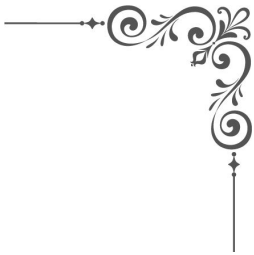
"I don't want that life. I want this one. With you." She looked down. "I know I'm not particularly good at any of this. You deserve—"

He held a finger up to her lips. "Don't say it. I don't want anyone except you, so long as you wish to be here. Do you understand?"

Susannah nodded, her head spinning as she made sense of his words. He wanted *her*, the Susannah who was only just learning how to do all that needed done around the ranch. "I don't want to be anywhere else."

He smiled at her, and the darkness closed around them as he kissed her again. Susannah lost herself in his arms. Here, no one could ever hurt her. No one could prevent her from living a life that she chose.

Here, she could be happy, with Jacob by her side for always.



Epilogue

JANUARY 1877

Fat snowflakes drifted outside as Jacob and Susannah's boots and coat dried by the stove in the kitchen. A ride into town in winter could always turn into an unexpected adventure, as Susannah found out on their ride home from church services, visiting, and shopping that afternoon. The snow had started soon after they left Crest Stone, and by the time they reached home, a few inches had accumulated.

Mrs. Abbott, fully recovered, set two steaming mugs of tea on the dining room table as Jacob sorted through the mail they'd picked up in town and Susannah unwrapped the last of the goods they'd purchased.

"You have a letter from Chicago." Jacob handed Susannah a small envelope with her mother's penmanship.

"Oh, it's from Mama!" She abandoned the delicious-looking oranges that had come all the way from California to sit and open the letter. Her fingers still tingled from the cold as she opened the pages.

Susannah skimmed the letter. Mama offered updates on her life in Chicago, all the theater shows and operas she'd attended and the dinner parties she'd been a guest at. There was news of Aunt Lillian and Uncle Terrance's children, all grown and with families of their own. And then finally, the information Susannah had most hoped to hear.

She read Mama's words with a smile.

As you instructed, I set aside a small amount of the funds for my incidentals, deposited the amount you requested into a trust for the nearest orphanage, and then Lillian and I had a grand time shopping for the orphans of Chicago. You should have seen all that we purchased! Coats and hats, boots, dresses for the girls and trousers and shirts for the boys, toys and dolls and bits of candy! And oh, Susannah, I wish you could have seen their faces when we delivered it. I've never seen such excited children. They were surprised and grateful, and I told them all about my dear daughter who wished for them to have nothing more than a lovely holiday and an even better life. You ought to be proud of all that you've done—and all that you will do—for these children.

Susannah pressed the letter to her chest and grinned. And then she handed it to Jacob to read. When he finished, he took her hand in his.

"I believe you made the best choice for that money," he said, his eyes reflecting the love she knew he felt inside.

"I do too. I only wish I could have seen it!"

“I think you’ll see it in the years to come, as those children grow and turn into adults with opportunities for happy, productive lives, thanks to your trust.” His thumb traced the back of her hand.

Susannah looked from their intertwined hands to his face. And then she smiled, her secret nearly bursting from her heart. “I will have the opportunity to see at least one child receive gifts next Christmas.”

Jacob’s expression changed into one of confusion before his eyes widened and his mouth fell open. “Are you . . . What are . . . ?”

“I’m saying that by late this summer, you’ll be a father.” She couldn’t keep the sheer happiness she felt from her face any longer.

He looked down at her stomach—no different yet—in amazement. “Are you certain?”

Susannah laughed. “As certain as I can be. Mrs. Abbott helped me figure it out. In fact, I think she knew before I did.”

“I daresay I did,” Mrs. Abbott called from the kitchen.

Jacob grinned as Susannah giggled again. “I’m not surprised,” he said as he stood and pulled Susannah up with him.

“A baby,” he said. “We’re going to have a baby.” And with that, he placed a hand on either side of her face and brought her lips to his.

His kiss drove away the cold, the worries she had about carrying a baby, and any fear that lingered about her mother’s happiness in Chicago.

All was well. And so long as they had each other, it would only get better as time went on.

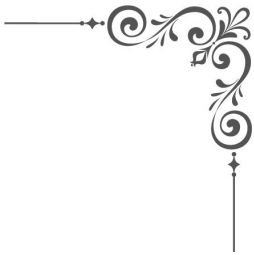


THANK YOU FOR READING! I hope you enjoyed Jacob and Susannah’s story. The next book in the series, *A Bartered Bride*, is available to pre-order now. That book will find Matthew Canton, the preacher’s son who witnessed Jacob and Susannah’s wedding, advertising for a bride of his own—and finding himself on the dangerous side of a bargain!

Want to know how the little town of Crest Stone began? Find out in the Gilbert Girls series. The first book in that series is *Building Forever*.

To be alerted about my new books, sign up here: http://bit.ly/catsnewsletter I give subscribers a free download of *Forbidden Forever*, a Gilbert Girls prequel novella. You’ll also get sneak peeks at upcoming books, insights into the writer life, discounts and deals, inspirations, and so much more. I'd love to have *you* join the fun!

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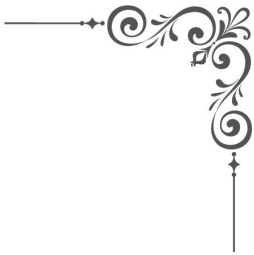
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About the Author, Cat Cahill

A SUNSET. SNOW ON THE mountains. A roaring river in the spring. A man and a woman who can't fight the love that pulls them together. The danger and uncertainty of life in the Old West. This is what inspires me to write. I hope you find an escape in my books!

I live with my family and a houseful of dogs and cats in Kentucky. When I'm not writing, I'm losing myself in a good book, planning my next travel adventure, doing a puzzle, attempting to garden, or wrangling my kids.